

Grappling with the grotesque

Review of:

Frances S. Connelly, *The Grotesque in Western Art and Culture: The Image at Play*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012, 190 pp., 62 b & w illus., £64.99 hdbk, ISBN 9781107011250

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Frances S. Connelly's deceptively slight volume, *The Grotesque in Western Art and Culture: The Image at Play*, is a book teeming with fresh ideas. In this age of specialization, it is increasingly rare for one scholarly study to dare to address a topic as broad as that announced by this one's title, yet Connelly's erudition and openness to the flux required by her theme combine to make a rewarding experience for the reader—as well as to challenge some fundamental underpinnings of the discipline of art history.¹ This book sullies traditional borders between periods and aesthetic categories and insists on the ethical dimensions of art and its histories. As such, it exemplifies the grotesque that is its subject. It is a wise book, remaining empathetic, humble, and playful all the while. In short, Connelly's *The Grotesque in Western Art and Culture* is a prodigious accomplishment, which this review assesses in general before addressing individual chapters.

The book ends with an analysis of the Kantian sublime in contrast with John Ruskin's notion of the 'noble grotesque', which Connelly rechristens the 'profound grotesque'. The neat comparison also illuminates her approach to the material at hand, so I quote at length:

The pleasure in the sublime, as [Immanuel] Kant understood, is in our mastery of it. Ours is the mastering gaze of the wanderer, challenged by the world but transcending it through our intellectual prowess.

There are no such absolutes for the boundary creature that is the grotesque. Ruskin conceptualized the profound grotesque as an exalted but partial vision. The profound grotesque is a work of art 'arising from the confusion of the imagination by the presence of truths which it cannot wholly grasp.'² Even after its maker wrestles these 'appalling and eventful' truths into imagistic form, its meaning

¹ In this Connelly surpasses the already considerable breadth of her earlier, groundbreaking study of the 'primitive,' *The Sleep of Reason: Primitivism in European Art and Aesthetics, 1825-1907*, University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1995.

² John Ruskin, *The Works of John Ruskin*, Library edition, edited by E. T. Cook and Alexander Wedderburn, 39 vols., including appendix, London: George Allen, 1903-12, 5: 130.

is left for each 'beholder to work out' — no single, unchanging vision, but each one of us making the connections and grappling with the ambiguities and contradictions within the grotesque *Spielraum* [room to play] in our own way. There is a deep humility to this refusal to claim the fiction of fixed, absolute truths, embracing instead the concrete realities of life as we experience it. The sublime pictures the natural world as wordless and inchoate without a mastering vision imposed upon it; but as we see here, the grotesque leans in close, to listen and observe its breathtaking diversity, and to seek meaning in its particular incarnations. The most noble of grotesques do not seek mastery over the living and dying world; rather, they belong to it, and seek revelation within it and through it. (160)

This 'lean[ing] in close, listen[ing] and observ[ing]', points to a productive paradox for all of us who are interested in the particular address and potential of visual art. Connelly argues that the power of the grotesque resides in its visuality, which is to say its near untranslatability into text. At the same time, this visuality is never a pure, disembodied visuality familiar (at least in theory) especially to modernist scholars. One thinks, for example, of Clement Greenberg's restriction of proper aesthetic appreciation to 'eyesight alone'.³ No, the grotesque is a visual modality that affects the viewer viscerally; it produces an emphatically embodied visuality. In short, the grotesque addresses one through visual means, but one must grapple with it with one's entire self, with physical, emotional, and mental responses. The latter are, in turn, embedded in everyone's deeply rooted sociality, requiring that decisions about the grotesque are profoundly ethical as well. The articulation of this non-textual, embodied, ethical visuality is a central contribution of this book.

Connelly makes a convincing case for the source of this simultaneously inclusive and expansive grotesque in Horace's *Ars poetica* (circa 19 BCE). The classic source of *ut pictura poesis* (poetry is like painting) metamorphoses, in Connelly's rereading, into a powerful argument for the *pictura* that is not at all like *poesis*. Horace presents us with what Connelly calls a 'combinatory grotesque' (26). The Roman muses: 'Suppose: a painter starts from a human head, he joins to it a horse's neck, he inserts a variety of feathers on limbs assembled from any and everywhere, and so, repulsively, a woman of appealing form above ends in a black fish.... [C]ould you, my friends...refrain from laughing?' Connelly answers for Horace, quoting him further: 'A poet might imagine such things, but these ridiculous monstrosities are like a "sick man's dreams [*aegri somnia*]...empty of substance, no single form relating head and foot" (1-9)' (26).⁴ She explains that 'Horace's

³ See Caroline A. Jones's magisterial study, *Eyesight Alone: Clement Greenberg's Modernism and the Bureaucratization of the Senses*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005.

⁴ Horace, 'The Art of Poetry: A Prose Translation,' trans. James Hynd, in *Horace: The Art of Poetry*, ed. Burton Raffel, Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 1974, 43-62.

condemnation of the outlandish hybrid has been read primarily as a warning against artistic license' (26). But Connelly recognizes it as something more, namely, 'a powerful aversion to mixtures' (27). Indeed, she finds warnings about the purported dangers of mixing throughout *Ars poetica*, and she links them to Horace's concern about the 'debasement of Roman culture' (27). In his words: 'Once there existed men of wisdom with the power and insight to separate public from private things, sacred from profane, to prevent marriage with aliens, to give rights to husbands, to build cities, to engrave laws in wood' (396-99). In Connelly's judgment: 'Reading this last passage against the grain reveals that the grotesque exemplifies for Horace the threat posed by the profane, the alien, the feminine and the wild' (27). Connelly explains how Vitruvius, in his *De architectura* (27 CE), carried such fear of the other and/or excess into the art of architecture. For him ornament must remain subservient to structure—that is, it must stay in its proper place—or it subverts the structure itself. Whence this subversive power? Connelly sees it clearly: ornament and the grotesque were 'engines of persuasion because they moved their audience—not by logical argument but by their appeal to the senses...' (30).⁵ Their sensual appeal is bodily; it does not allow comfortable distance but keeps us enmeshed in the material of life and death. In short:

Underlying Horace's ridicule of the feathered mermaid is perhaps a far deeper fear of an image that is out of the control of language and resistant to reason. Adding in his strictures against intermixtures makes it clear that the grotesque threatens boundaries of all sorts and, in doing so, opens up possibilities that undermine the status quo and those who benefit from its stasis. (31)

Connelly's own willingness 'to lean in close', to remain immanent to the visual forms at hand, opens her—and us—to renewed appreciation of works long understood otherwise, as well as to the changing meanings of the term, 'grotesque'. The author resists an identification of the 'true' grotesque, which some historians identify with sixteenth-century ornamentation (such as Raphael's Vatican *loggia* of 1519), which had been inspired by the late fifteenth-century rediscovery of *grottesche* in Nero's Domus Aurea in Rome (4-5). In the first place, Renaissance artists were 'no slaves to archaeological accuracy', as Connelly points out; they creatively mixed found motifs with imaginative designs of their own. In the second, she contends, 'grotesques are by their nature intermixed, unresolved, and impure...and to represent them as fixed entities misses their most salient feature' (19). Addressing changing meanings of the word 'grotesque' itself, Connelly declares:

It is not our role to decide whether these shifting attributions are correct. Rather than dismiss as misguided the contemporaries of Jacques Callot, who

⁵ Here she also addresses ornament in classical rhetoric.

described his caricatured figures as grotesque (to take just one example), it is far more fruitful to explore the new possibilities created by the collapse of boundaries between *grottesche* and caricature. (19)⁶

One such intriguing discovery is that the general shift from a more ornamental to a more figurative, carnivalesque grotesque, signaled by Callot, also suggests a continuity. In brief, the overt social transgression of the latter was not new to the grotesque but rather a revelation of what had been latent, or covert, in earlier forms (as Connelly's interpretation of Horace's *Ars poetica* confirms).

Of course, such openness also risks complete dissolution of boundaries—a threat of the abject grotesque, discussed in Chapter 5—but Connelly admirably identifies 'strands' or 'streams' (20) that constitute her book's chapters. They develop more or less chronologically, though Connelly—again, like the grotesque—maintains a certain porousness, never allowing her themes to harden into impermeable categories. She is able to retain this flexible structure by means of some chronological overlap between chapters, occasional repetition of images, and carefully placed comparisons backward and forward in the text. These comparisons, as well as her dependably close descriptions of images, contribute considerable pleasure—and revelation—to the reader willing to follow their directions, to stay with the pages, immanent to the book as it unfolds and folds back upon itself.

The book develops as follows. Somewhat unorthodoxly, Connelly identifies her 'Introduction' already as Chapter 1. The oddity stays with the reader until one realizes that one is already entering the space of the grotesque. Put another way, there is no objective vantage point outside the grotesque; a traditional introduction preceding the first chapter would make no sense. The Introduction's subtitle, 'Entering the *Spielraum*', underscores this point. Connelly clarifies her use of the German word (itself, notably, a combination of two words, *Spiel* and *Raum*):

...if we understand that the grotesque ruptures the boundaries of disparate realities, then the contested space created between the two is where the grotesque creates meaning. This is the "gap" that the viewer must bridge, the circuit he or she must complete. The operations of the grotesque pry open what we shall provisionally describe as a *Spielraum*, creating "elbow room" or "room to play". (12)

⁶ Connelly's explicit culprit in this regard is Philippe Morel, whose *Les Grotesques: Les figures de l'imaginaire dans la fin de la Renaissance*, Paris: Flammarion, 1997, is said to provide 'an indispensable study of the Italian *grottesche*.... Morel's methodology is perfectly suited to a deep period study but, in my view, oversteps when it dismisses *grottesche* 'contaminated' by Flemish art or removes the work of Bosch, Arcimboldo (Morel later reversed this judgment on Arcimboldo), and Callot from the grotesque because of their indifference to the classical models' (163n23).

Connelly explains that the term gained parlance in the social sciences — she cites Erik Erikson (12)⁷ — and points out subsequently that ‘the role of the liminal in defining and reaffirming cultural norms has been the focus of a number of cultural anthropologists, including [Claude] Lévi-Strauss, Victor Turner, and Mary Douglas’ (16).⁸ Here she signals that she will draw from sources well beyond the traditional boundaries of ‘art history’, including but not limited to the writings of Sigmund Freud, Mikhail Bakhtin, Georges Bataille, and Julia Kristeva.⁹ In this ‘Introduction’, which opens with the image of a *grotto* — the mistaken namesake of the grotesque (since the Domus Aurea ruins were underground, its discoverers associated it with grottoes) (1-3) — Connelly reveals that she will pull anything useful to her project into its mysterious depths. Again, this approach partakes of the operations of the grotesque. Strangely enough, given the visuality of the grotesque, previous studies of it have been in literature; Connelly notes those of Wolfgang Kayser, Frances Barasch, and Geoffrey Harpham in particular (18).¹⁰ Although there are some art historians who have addressed aspects of the grotesque — scholarship on the

⁷ Erik Erikson, ‘Play and Actuality,’ in Maria W. Piers, ed., *Play and Development*, New York: Norton, 1972, 165.

⁸ Connelly finds Lévi-Strauss’s notion of *bricolage* to be ‘extremely useful for explaining the process by which cultures create new meaning from the fragments of the old’ (22). See Lévi-Strauss, *The Savage Mind*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1966. Connelly cites many texts by Victor Turner, beginning with *The Forest of Symbols: Aspects of Ndembu Ritual*, Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1967. ‘Essential’ reading on the liminal, Connelly notes (162n16), is still Mary Douglas, *Purity and Danger: An Analysis of the Concepts of Pollution and Taboo*, London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1966.

⁹ Connelly is drawn to Freud’s links between jokes and dreams — especially ‘condensation, incongruity, unexpected shifts’ (16) — for the grotesque in general and to his essays on the uncanny and fear of castration for the traumatic grotesque (Chapter 5). See Sigmund Freud, ‘Jokes and Their Relation to the Unconscious’ [1905], ‘The Uncanny’ [1919], and ‘Medusa’s Head’ [1922] in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, trans. James Strachey, London: Hogarth Press, 1953. Essential for the carnivalesque in Chapter 4 is Mikhail Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World*, trans. Helene Iswolsky, Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1965. Bataille and Kristeva prove most pertinent to the traumatic grotesque of Chapter 5. Connelly employs two texts by Bataille: Georges Bataille, Letter, 15 September 1939, ‘The Ascent of Mount Aetna,’ trans. Annette Michelson, *October* 36 (1986): 103; ‘Informe,’ in ‘Dictionnaire,’ *Documents* 7 (December 1929): 382; and the now classic text on the abject, Julia Kristeva, *Powers of Horror*, trans. Leon S. Roudiez, New York: Columbia University Press, 1982.

¹⁰ A ‘very helpful study that traces the meanings of the word ‘grotesque’ through the centuries’ (161n1) is Frances Barasch, *The Grotesque: A Study in Meanings*, The Hague: Mouton, 1971. Kayser and Harpham’s books also remain ‘essential reading’ (18), but — despite their titles’ claims — focus predominantly on literature, in Connelly’s account. See Wolfgang Kayser, *The Grotesque in Art and Literature* [1957], trans. Ulrich Weisstein, New York: Columbia University Press, 1981, and Geoffrey Harpham, *On the Grotesque: Strategies of Contradiction in Art and Literature*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1982.

sixteenth century, Connelly notes, has been especially rich (21)¹¹—there has been no ‘overarching history of the grotesque visual tradition’ (18) until now. Connelly explains that her own anthology about post-1800 examples, *Modern Art and the Grotesque* (2003), ‘was sparked by the striking discontinuity between the pervasiveness of grotesque imagery in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, and the dearth of scholarship on the grotesque itself’ (18).¹² One learns, thus, that the author has been grappling with the grotesque for some time; coming from within, she becomes a trusted guide to its *Spielraum*.

Chapter 2, ‘Improvisation I: *Grottesche*’, addresses the grotesque as ‘sophisticated play and inspired artifice, linked closely to ornament’ (26). Although this strand is least familiar to us today, it represents the earliest understanding of the grotesque. It is here that Connelly rereads *Ars poetica* and argues for the specifically visual power of the grotesque (26-31). Turning to images, Connelly moves from Raphael’s *loggia* and other Italian, graphic inventions to Northern prints and pattern books, which brought native traditions of drollery into the mix. Connelly’s description of an etching by Lucas Kilian from Augsburg in 1607 exemplifies both the unrestrained, far less classical grotesque of the North as well as her own willingness to ‘lean in close’, adopting the playful wit of the work in her own prose. She writes, ‘On either side, just above midpoint, reversed figures work in tandem to render each other’s efforts pointless. The one below sprouts a long curving neck, leading to a bird, or dragon-shaped head, topped by a lighted lamp. This flame, so flamboyantly displayed, is promptly extinguished by a well-aimed fart emitted by his counterpart, strategically positioned above’ (35). Looking closely at the print, and encouraging her readers to do the same, Connelly also moves deftly between works. In this case she turns back to an earlier, Italian example (Giovanni da Brescia’s engraving after an ornamental panel by Nicoletto da Modena, circa 1516): ‘A quick comparison with da Brescia’s engraving, where classical *putti* sit placidly on tendrils, demonstrates how much more distortion and exaggeration play a role in northern grotesques’ (35). The grotesque as a sign of inventive freedom emerged again in Italy, however, this time as a full-fledged aesthetic principle far outreaching its early designation of ornament. Giorgio Vasari’s hugely influential history, *Lives of the Most Excellent Painters, Sculptors, and Architects* (1550), positions Michelangelo as the greatest artist because, as Vasari claimed, ‘the license he allowed himself has served as a great encouragement to others to follow his example; and subsequently we have seen the creation of new kinds of fantastic ornamentation containing more of the grotesque than of rule or reason’ (37). Connelly’s description—too rich to summarize (40-41)—of Michelangelo’s Jonah on the Sistine Chapel ceiling (1508-12) re-illuminates the extraordinary virtuosity of that canonical site through the provocative lens of the grotesque. The mannerism

¹¹ Connelly enumerates pertinent studies, too numerous to cite here.

¹² Frances S. Connelly, ed., *Modern Art and the Grotesque*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003.

that Michelangelo inspired was discouraged by the end of the sixteenth century, however; Chapter 2 closes with Counter-Reformation suspicion of the ornamental grotesque as a return to Horatian arguments about the necessity of stable boundaries.

Chapter 3, 'Improvisation II: Arabesques', follows the reemergence of the grotesque at the end of the seventeenth century and well into the twentieth. 'Arabesque' and 'moresque' are introduced. Connelly explains that they became the more common terms used 'to denote this nonfigurative ornament, [but] they were almost immediately confused and simply intermixed with "grotesque" ornament' (54-55). A helpful distinction between the previous chapter and this is that 'Mannerist artists saw the grotesque and capriccio as a form of extreme play with the conventions of style, but it would be safe to characterize eighteenth-century arabesques more as stylish' (56). Connelly points out, however, that the Rococo—the eighteenth-century style most closely associated with the arabesque—challenges accepted boundaries in another way: 'The arabesque and caprice constituted one of the principle boundaries through which a growing array of exotic others first found their way into the margins of European artistic expression' (57). *Chinoiserie* and *turquerie*, for example, began to flourish. Connelly is refreshingly nuanced in her assessment of the 'other' in and through the grotesque. There are, of course, representations of offensive, European projection onto racial others, but the embrace of the exotic provides for the appearance, at least, of 'others'; a space in which Europeans could challenge their own curiosities and prejudices; and, eventually, a realm in which 'others' began to disrupt the status quo themselves. The arabesque as a space for imaginative play, then, opens the exotic from geographical others to historical others (e.g., the excavations at Herculaneum [1738] and Pompeii [1748], which inspired Robert Adam's designs at Osterley Park [1761-80]); indeed, it ventures to imagine interstellar others. The suite of engravings by Filippo Morghen, titled *Collection of the Most Remarkable Views of the Gentleman Wild Scull and of Mr. Hire on their Famous Trip to the Surface of the Moon* (circa 1764-72), exemplifies the latter. Connelly writes of one: 'Here we see the moon's inhabitants, who appear to be equal parts Native American and Chinese, living on a watery planet in their floating, pumpkin-like houses' (60). Connelly revels in this impure, playful mix as much as she is moved by Giambattista Piranesi's very different prints, beginning with the *Antichità Romane* (1756). She points out that his images of 'mottled and scarred magnificence' are not of ruins alone. Rather, 'Piranesi surrounds these monuments of the majestic past with beggars, washerwomen, and other marginal types' (60). Thus, Connelly understands that the 'other' has always included a broad swath of society at home as well as in exotic and imagined lands; in fact, we *become* 'other' as we try to traverse Piranesi's still darker architectural concoctions in the *Carceri d'invenzione* (1761). The grotesque disturbs at the same time it opens a space for empathy.

The Enlightenment is known for clarity and logic, but Piranesi was not alone in his deep skepticism of both, and attention to the arabesque reveals that the

Enlightenment already harbored signs of romanticism to come. Connelly counters the classically 'Enlightenment' thought of John Locke, who abhorred ornamental speech, with that of Giambattista Vico—whose *La scienza nuova* (1725) links, in her account, the earliest peoples' 'combinatory imagery to symbolic expression' (62)—and Friedrich Schlegel—whose *Gespräch über die Poesie* (1799-1800) claims the arabesque, in his words, as 'the oldest and most original form of human imagination' (63).¹³ This emphasis on symbolism's emanating from the earliest times coalesced, with the Romantics, into a profound appreciation for what Connelly calls a 'vital primitivity' (64). Philipp Otto Runge exemplifies this primitivist strand in Germany; his unfinished *Tageszeiten* series (1808), which he called arabesques, mixed classical, Christian, and mystical (Böhmean) iconography with the symbolism of colors, times of day, seasons, and plants (64-65). Although the clear symmetry and articulation of figures may strike us today as restrained, no less a figure than Johann Wolfgang von Goethe is said to have observed, 'Just look at it: it's enough to make you crazy, beautiful and mad at the same time.... [I]t wants to embrace everything, and so loses itself in the elemental; still, there are infinite beauties in the details...' (66).¹⁴ In the hands of the French, the Romantic arabesque embraced the occult. In this context, Connelly describes Victor Hugo's marvelous drawing, *Octopus with the Initials VH* (circa 1866): 'the creature hovers in the watery formlessness of the ink wash, its tentacles flaring out to fill the page, while also forming the initials of the author' (68-69). Such interfusion and mutability are also the material of artists as diverse as Grandville, Odilon Redon, and Hector Guimard—whose entrances to the Parisian Métropolitain, Connelly suggests, update the grotto for modern city dwellers (72). Connelly closes Chapter 3 with a critical assessment, which warrants attention, of the position of the arabesque in the twentieth century.

Connelly breaks from her chronological development to observe: 'The manifold relationship between the formal invention and individual virtuosity of twentieth-century modernism and that of sixteenth-century mannerism has scarcely been addressed in art history or criticism' (74). She then makes an audacious claim: 'If we focus on the grotesque in modernism, we will see that it infiltrates and unravels not only the established conventions of representation, but also our own conventions of thinking about modernism' (74). To bolster her case, Connelly reminds us that early twentieth-century German art theorists recognized a fundamental connection between mannerism (especially figured by El Greco) and

¹³ Connelly cites John Locke, 'On the Abuse of Words,' in *An Essay on Human Understanding*, London: T. Longman, 1690; rpt. 1796, vol. 2, book 3, ch. 10, 41; Giambattista Vico, *The New Science of Giambattista Vico*, trans. T. G. Bergin and M. H. Fisch, Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1986, 401, 428; Friedrich Schlegel, *Kritische Friedrich-Schlegel Ausgabe*, ed. E. Behler, Munich: 1900, 2: 319.

¹⁴ As related by S. Boisserée, 'Letter of May 4, 1811,' trans. John Gage, in *Goethe on Art*, London: Scolar Press, 1980, 226-28.

modern art.¹⁵ Carl Justi identified El Greco as the ‘prophet of the modern’ already in 1888, and in 1910, Julius Meier-Graefe claimed El Greco, with admiration, as an expressionist artist.¹⁶ Artists of the Blaue Reiter group in Munich assimilated these ideas; in the *Blaue Reiter Almanac* of 1912, Franz Marc hailed the ‘*mystical inner construction*’ that he recognized in El Greco (as well as Paul Cézanne).¹⁷ Although Connelly ends the chapter with a lovely, representative arabesque by fellow Blaue Reiter painter Paul Klee (80-81), she concludes this discussion of early twentieth-century German theory rather abruptly: ‘We have seen grotesque invention characterized as illegitimate and promiscuous, but as Horst Bredekamp has shown, critics of modern art and mannerism increasingly accused those artists of degeneracy, and their attacks took on more sinister racial overtones’ (77).¹⁸ Of course, Connelly, following Bredekamp, is right, but one is left wondering how much that despicable legacy is responsible for the continued centrality of France, not Germany, in histories of modernism. In other words, Connelly has unearthed a trove of engagement with the grotesque in German modernist writing and art. If the grotesque is as critical to modernism as she claims, then should not this German concentration at least de-centre the conventional Francophile narrative, as the grotesque has the power to do? Connelly remains true to her promise to rethink conventional modernism by debunking Cubism as ‘a paragon of intellectual and formalist art. Viewed from the perspective of the grotesque’, she writes, ‘it is equally true that cubism should be understood to be the ultimate in wit and virtuosity, in the best tradition of the improvisational grotesque’ (77). Her compelling reading of a collage by Pablo Picasso (78-79) supports her point, but it leaves predominantly French Cubism (regardless of Picasso’s actual Catalonian heritage) entrenched at the centre of modernism. *Or does it?* Perhaps the ultimate closure of Chapter 3 with a look at Klee is actually an opening, a gap that invites historians to reconsider this and other conventions of modernism as well. Welcome to the *Spielraum!*

Chapter 4, ‘Subversion: The Carnavalesque Body’, returns to the sixteenth century to follow another strand of the grotesque. Connelly neatly summarizes: ‘Far from classically based *grottesche* with their witty improvisations upon artistic convention, carnivalesque imagery provokes raucous, often ribald laughter as it mocks and subverts social convention, individual pretension, and hierarchies of all kinds’ (82). This strand is emphatically public, and, ‘[b]roadly speaking, the issues addressed by the carnivalesque are more often social and ethical than aesthetic’.

¹⁵ Compare another volume published in 2012, *El Greco and Modernism*, ed. Beat Wismer and Michael Scholz-Hänsel, Ostfildern: Hatje Cantz, 2012.

¹⁶ Carl Justi, *Velázquez und sein Jahrhundert* [1888], Bonn: F. Cohen, 1922, and Julius Meier-Graefe, *Spanische Reise*, Berlin: Fischer, 1910.

¹⁷ Franz Marc, ‘Spiritual Treasures,’ trans. H. Falkenstein, in *The Blaue Reiter Almanac* [1912], New York: Viking Press, 1974, 55-60, emphasis in the original.

¹⁸ Horst Bredekamp, ‘Der Manierismus der Moderne: Zur Problematik einer kunsthistorischen Erfolgsgeschichte,’ in *Das Ende des XX. Jahrhunderts: Standpunkte zur Kunst in Deutschland*, Cologne: DuMont, 2000, 277-98.

Further, 'The carnivalesque body can also function as the quintessential voice of the outsider, its satire and transgression serving as a powerful agent of change' (82). As such, it picks up on the potential of the exotic other in Chapter 3.

This chapter makes productive use especially of Bakhtin's seminal study, *Rabelais and His World*, to investigate the very bodily experience of the carnivalesque (the root of which, Connelly notes, is *carne*). Connelly's inspired description of Pieter Bruegel the Elder's engraving, *The Big Fish Eat the Little Fish* (1557), convinces of that fleshiness. Before addressing details, she writes: 'Nearly every fish has another in its mouth, one meal within another and one death within another, a blurred cycle of death and regeneration' (90). Connelly then moves nimbly from Bruegel to Callot, Domenico Tiepolo, William Hogarth, Francisco Goya, and James Ensor. In the twentieth century, Picasso's *Les Femmes d'Alger (O. J. R. M.)* (1907) is exemplary of the caricature as grotesque. For Connelly, it is 'the ultimate women on top, usurping the power of the gaze, mocking classical beauty by deforming it in every possible respect, masking so as to reveal and rebuff the viewer's desire' (111).¹⁹ Addressing the allusions to African masks, Connelly writes: 'As Patricia Leighton has shown, Picasso's subversive antics took aim beyond aesthetic issues, as typical of the carnivalesque. Anticolonialist and anarchist, his *demoiselles* call into question the presumptions of civilized European society' (111).²⁰ Not allowing her text to be too triumphant, however, Connelly – thankfully – interrupts herself: 'And yet Picasso's image contradicts all that, painting female sexuality as deviant and diseased. His disfigurement of women who do not stay in their place follows a well-traveled road in Western art' (111). This example underscores how the exploration of 'others' in the grotesque can be reprehensible or liberating or, perhaps at its most intense, both at once. Connelly closes with a painting by Otto Dix and writes, 'The emphasis on such hybrids – fusions of races, genders, species, and bodies merged with machines – embraced by the German Dadaists, and Hannah Höch in particular, violently subverted the growing cultural clamor for racial purity' (113).²¹

Connelly introduces Chapter 5, 'Trauma: The Failure of Representation', with characteristic clarity, so I quote:

The abject, the monstrous, and the demonic are the expressions that contemporary viewers most readily associate with the grotesque. While

¹⁹ On this point, Connelly cites the important essay, Anna Chave, 'New Encounters with *Les Femmes d'Alger*: Gender, Race, and the origins of Cubism,' *Art Bulletin* 76, no. 4 (December 1994): 596-611.

²⁰ Patricia Leighton, *Re-ordering the Universe: Picasso and Anarchism, 1897-1914*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1989.

²¹ One wishes that such an endorsement of Höch were accompanied by an analysis of one of her images, but a footnote directs the reader to the 'seminal essay' in Connelly's earlier anthology: Maria Makela, 'Grotesque Bodies: Weimar-Era Medicine and the Photomontages of Hannah Höch,' in Connelly, ed., *Modern Art and the Grotesque, 193-219*, as well as to other excellent sources on Höch.

improvisational and subversive grotesques challenge accepted conventions, both social and aesthetic, this strand makes visual what is most threatening, inspiring fear and repulsion as it tears at the ultimate boundary between self and oblivion. (115)

As noted above, Freud, Bataille, and Kristeva prove helpful in traversing this territory. After touching on late fifteenth and early sixteenth examples of monstrosity (in particular, a work by Hieronymous Bosch), Connelly moves to the Baroque, reminding the reader that the period ‘constituted a breaking point in the ornamental strand of the grotesque’ (122), but suggesting that it contributed to the grotesque with new abject realism. She mentions the canonic painting, Caravaggio’s *David and Goliath*, but her – if I may say – penetrating reading of his *Incredulity of Saint Thomas* (1601-02), is breathtaking. Connelly explains that Jesus, returned to life, ‘instructs Thomas not to rely upon sight alone, but to actually touch the wounds in his hands and side. To read this text is one thing; to witness it in all its strange and squeamish reality [which she proceeds to describe] is quite another’ (122-23). Connelly’s presentation of this painting, more than any other, convinced this reader that the visual, rather than the textual, is essential to the grotesque, but also that its attendant responses are visceral indeed. This chapter, further, makes some of the most compelling and unexpected comparisons in the book. Connelly’s assessment of hair and abjection in Peter Paul Rubens’s *The Head of the Medusa* (circa 1618) (124-26), followed some pages later by an analysis thereof in Frida Kahlo’s *Self-Portrait with Cropped Hair* (1940) (144-46) is richly suggestive. Here, too, she retains an openness to conflicting interpretations, writing:

On one level, Kahlo mutilates and debases the hair (that [Diego] Rivera ostensibly loved). On another, she sets it free to writhe and spawn (and here the work has an interesting resonance with the Medusa story and Rubens’s painting discussed earlier). Embracing the mortal frailty of the body, in defiance of social conventions, Frida Kahlo opened a fertile new direction of the traumatic grotesque. (146)²²

It appears that the abject, finally, is the strand of the grotesque that has proved most appealing to women, queer, and/or other minority artists, in order ‘to wound the gaze that would make them monstrous’ (144). In this context, Connelly cites the work of Ana Mendieta, Kiki Smith, Mona Hatoum, Andres Serrano, and Robert Gober (144, 147). One wishes that any of these contemporary artists’ works were illustrated and discussed, especially in order to explore the feminized grotesque in the hands of more female and feminized artists. Fortunately, Connelly’s anthology,

²² Following such analyses, the reader is entirely convinced of Connelly’s critique (146-48) of Yve-Alain Bois and Rosalind Krauss’s unfortunate exclusion of the abject grotesque from their somewhat rarefied notion of *l’informe*. Cf. Yve-Alain Bois and Rosalind Krauss, *Formless: A User’s Guide*, New York: Zone Books, 1997.

Modern Art and the Grotesque, fills some of these lacunae and should function as a companion piece to this volume.²³

Chapter 6, 'Revelation: Profound Play', is, at twelve pages, the book's shortest chapter, its conclusion, and also an invitation to further study. Connelly writes: 'The grotesque is rooted in the sensate body and in the earthly world it inhabits. Yet through this immanent and immediate reality, artists have created works of profound power'. She explains that the revelatory grotesque exists in each of the strands addressed thus far: 'It does not comprise a strand in itself, but the extreme limits of existing ones, pushed to the breaking point in an effort to express a profound truth' (149). It is here that Connelly explores Ruskin's thought on the grotesque, as discussed above (149-53). She reminds the reader of earlier references, e.g., Michelangelo's *Jonah on the Sistine Ceiling* (149), and introduces new ones, from Matthias Grünewald's *Crucifixion* (circa 1510-15) to Arnold Böcklin's *The Silence of the Sea* (1887). The bizarre sea creatures of the latter remind one of Horace's injunction against mer-creatures and make one long for more of these full-bloodied monstrosities. As Connelly writes, 'It is as if we are given a vision of an alternate, completely convincing universe, or perhaps a glimpse of the vital forces of life as ancient peoples might have seen then. Our mundane, functional existence is thin gruel compared with this robust stew' (156). And yet, as Connelly also reports, Meier-Graefe nearly wrote Böcklin out of art history, because the latter appeared to him as 'an embarrassing misstep on the road to [purely formal, abstract] modernism' (157).²⁴ In this important book, however, Frances Connelly grapples with the art that grapples with the grotesque, concocting her own robust stew that will nourish art history for years to come.

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²³ See Christine Ross, 'Redefinitions of Abjection in Contemporary Performances of the Female Body,' in Connelly, ed., *Modern Art and the Grotesque*, 281-90, and Noël Carroll, 'The Grotesque Today: Preliminary Notes Toward a Taxonomy,' in Connelly, ed., *Modern Art and the Grotesque*, 291-312.

²⁴ The key text is Julius Meier-Graefe, *Der Fall Böcklin und die Lehre von den Einheiten* (Julius Hofmann, 1905), which has yet to be translated into English.