WHERE LIGHT IN DARKNESS LIES:

THE GROTESQUE IN THEORY AND CONTEMPORARY AMERICAN FILM

A Dissertation

By

SCHUY R. WEISHAAR

Submitted to the Office of Graduate Studies of

Middle Tennessee State University

in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

December 2010

Major Subject: English

UMI Number: 3459292

WHERE LIGHT IN DARKNESS LIES:

THE GROTESQUE IN THEORY AND CONTEMPORARY AMERICAN FILM

SCHUY R. WEISHAAR

Approved:

_____
Dr. David Lavery, Dissertation Director

_____
Dr. Linda Badley, Reader

_____
Dr. Allen Hibbard, Reader

_____
Dr. Tom Strawman, Chair, English Department

_____
Dr. Michael D. Allen, Dean, College of Graduate Studies

DEDICATION

For Felicia, Finn, Athan, and Kyle

ABSTRACT

This dissertation investigates the work of five contemporary American

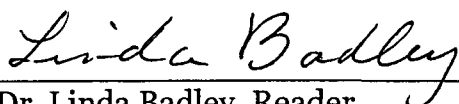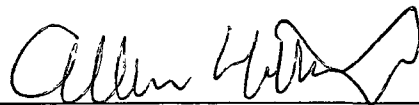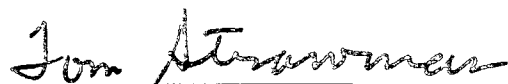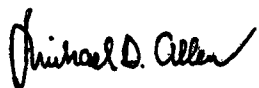filmmakers (Tim Burton, Terry Gilliam, Joel and Ethan Coen, and David Lynch)

through the lens of the grotesque. Chapter I discusses the roles of genre and

classical Hollywood style in the emergence of aspects of the grotesque in film

history and suggests that the disintegration of the old structures of the industry,

well under way by the 1960s and 70s, afforded filmmakers new opportunities to

experiment with the grotesque. Chapter II provides a thorough examination of

the theories of the grotesque that have been prominent in contemporary

scholarship on the subject, beginning with Wolfgang Kayser and Mikhail Bakhtin

and moving to the more recent theories of Dieter Meindl, David K. Danow, and

Geoffrey Galt Harpham, among others.

The subsequent chapters on Tim Burton, Terry Gilliam, Joel and Ethan

Coen, and David Lynch build on facets of grotesque theory. Each chapter begins

by delineating a critical direction from within the more eclectic theory chapter

(II) and specifying and extending the theoretical approach taken in interpreting

the material. Chapter III focuses on locating a Bakhtinian relationship between

the "official" and the "carnival" in Tim Burton's films. Chapter IV explores the

connection and overlap of the mythic (in Harpham and Danow), madness (in

Foucault's *Madness and Civilization*), and the grotesque as a prominent feature

of Terry Gilliam's films. Chapter V interprets physically manifested responses to

catastrophe and the acting style through which they are presented in the films of

Joel and Ethan Coen as related to Geoffrey Galt Harpham's notion of "the grotesque as interval" (14-15). Chapter VI investigates the modernist grotesque (as theorized by Dieter Meindl) in David Lynch's films through figures and functions (associated with the concepts of the double and the abhuman) that threaten human and/or subjective identity and that also suggest some degree of conceptual overlap among the uncanny, the gothic, and the grotesque. Finally, Chapter VII, relying on reflections from Theodor Adorno's *Aesthetic Theory* and an excerpt from Herman Melville's *Moby-Dick*, attempts to bring closure by linking the grotesque, with all of its vagaries and contradictions, with humanity itself.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

"Imagine human beings living in an underground, cavelike dwelling . . . , able

to see only in front of them. Light is provided by a fire burning far above and

behind them. Between the prisoners and the fire, there is an elevated road

stretching. Imagine that along this road a low wall has been built . . . . Also

imagine, then, that there are people alongside the wall carrying multifarious

artifacts that project above it."   —Plato, *The Republic,* Book VII

I: Cinematic Grotesquery, Genre, and History

In an accompanying sketch that demonstrates Athanasius Kircher's

"magic lantern" in the 1671 edition of his *Ars Magna Lucis et Umbrae*, he has

drawn a dark room divided in half: on one side is the box containing his

invention; emerging from the other side of a partition is a shaft of light

projecting an image on the brick wall some distance away (Parkinson 10-11).

And what is the content of that image, now a foundational one in the

prehistory of cinema? It is the figure of grinning death: a human skeleton, a

sickle tucked under its right arm and an hourglass in its left hand (10). The

grotesque, defined succinctly and judiciously by Phillip Thomson as "the

unresolved clash of incompatibles in work and response": "the ambivalently

abnormal," has been a part of the movies since their conception in or out of

other art forms and manners of visual representation (27). While it can be glimpsed across the history of popular film in America from the silents through the 1960s, allowed to explore variations amenable to various generic requirements (in the incorporation of grotesquery in depiction of the monsters of horror or of the ridiculousness in comedy, etc.), it is also chained in a way, tethered to the concept of genre.[1] Even so, the collision of opposites on which the grotesque thrives is present in early American film, especially in comedy and gothic/horror (and, later, in science fiction/fantasy as well), though only to a certain degree. The demands of genre allow glimpses, elements or aspects, of the grotesque, but rarely on the scale of what is possible after the studio system falls apart and the production code with it.

Silent slapstick comedies of the Sennett Keystone variety appeal to the grotesque in their clownish reliance on comic violence and play with the threat of death. The mild, Dickensian grotesquery of Chaplin's Tramp in *The Gold Rush* or *Modern Times* makes satiric comedy out of dehumanizing situations (Cook 202). Chaplin extends this trajectory even further in *Monsieur Verdoux*, his brooding, grimly comic film in which a middle aged clerk takes to romancing and murdering rich women in order to get their money to support his family. The most disturbing scene in this film may be the final one in which Verdoux walks away from the camera to his death at the

---

[1] In *Film Genre: Hollywood and Beyond*, Barry Langford argues that even as narrative cinema emerged as melodrama, a concept he uses to describe pregeneric cinema of the silent period, films are already being drawn toward generic poles, often associated with the class positions of viewers. He identifies melodramatic pathos as the center around which films as different as Griffith's *Birth of a Nation* and Chaplin's *The Kid* orient themselves, even as such films gravitate towards the confines of the genre film (42-43).

guillotine, but suddenly he is walking with a slight limp—Chaplin as lady-killer and Chaplin as lovable Tramp merge uneasily. Buster Keaton, too, plays with the comic grotesque, particularly in scenes like those in *The Navigator* or *Steamboat Bill Jr.* when the world seems to be crashing down around him, and he escapes death, often by chance, but remains apparently unaffected, keeping the stoic deadpan gaze on his face throughout. And others (W. C. Fields, Laurel and Hardy, the anarchic Marx Brothers, et al.) extend this trajectory in their various ways.

Whereas early comedy arrives at light grotesquery by engaging in humor through introducing the threats of violence, social problems, and catastrophe into comic situations, narratives, and structures, early film horror and gothic invert this strategy. The grotesquery in these films seems to rely on the mismatch of humor, ridiculousness, and the like within a gothic/horror aesthetic context reliant on the ominous style of German Expressionist cinema (Bordwell and Thompson 103). The films by directors such as James Whale (*Frankenstein, The Invisible Man*, and *Bride of Frankenstein*), Tod Browning (*Dracula* and *Freaks*), and Karl Freund (*The Mummy*), among others, rely on exotic, threatening presences, represented in their films by actors like Boris Karloff and Bela Legosi, whose performances can at times cross the border from the terrifying into the ridiculous. At other times, films such as these seem to cast an ironic eye on their own subject matter, as the example of Browning's *Freaks* demonstrates.

Freaks is a film that takes experimentation with the grotesque in this era of American filmmaking about as far as it can go within the Hollywood

system. With a cast composed mostly of actual circus performers (circus "freaks" to use the parlance of the variety of "show" they are associated with), Browning reverses the horror film, similarly to what Whale does with *Frankenstein*, and makes monsters out of the cruel "normal" people in the film. While his camera, perhaps fetishistically, lingers over the variously "freakish" bodies of his performers (a "human torso," a set of Siamese twins, a legless boy, a "human skeleton," a few "pinheads," a "he-she," some dwarves, and others), he does allow them to be perceived as a kind, caring, life-loving carnival family. That is, until they are wronged. Then they become a murderous, vengeful throng of xenophobic monsters and are, therefore, pulled back within the normative function of the monster in the genre. In both cases (in comedy and in gothic/horror), then, one of the functions of generic conventions seems to be to provide a "coherent baseline," as David Bordwell puts it in "The Classical Hollywood Style, 1917-60," which allows for "bursts of stylization," but only insofar as such bursts fit within the "range of permissible stylization" and thus remain oriented around the "classical norm" (71).

As with any broad, sweeping theory of the history of anything, this narrative is only suggestive of what seems to be a trend in American filmmaking within the system from the rise of the studio until its fall. There are surely examples (probably especially among the B-movie catalog) that would provide challenges to this notion. One very famous and prolific exception is Alfred Hitchcock, who, after directing twenty or so films in England and rising to considerable popularity there, came to Hollywood in 1938, where the film industry was booming and able to sustain his big budget

popular art films (Cook 326). Over the next twenty years, Hitchcock would redefine the sufficiently vague genre of suspense/thrillers, establishing ownership over it, all the while engaging in unparalleled experimentation with nearly every facet of the filmmaking process. He integrated aspects of clever banter, chase sequences, and visual gags into films about murder, espionage, and identity crisis. He would play with subtle contrasts between the threat of a murderous psychotic with his perceived normality in a provincial town of people who fail to realize how dangerous he is in *Shadow of a Doubt*. *Spellbound* integrates a dreamscape constructed by Salvador Dali to illustrate a trip through a Freudian unconscious. *Rope*'s story is constructed around two young men who attempt to prove themselves worthy Nietzschean supermen by killing a friend and then having a dinner party for which they use the box that holds the corpse for a dinner table. *Strangers on a Train* plays with an initially rather silly doubling of Guy with the oddly humorous Bruno, and Bruno retains his ridiculously pathetic quality even as he becomes considerably more threatening after he kills Guy's wife (satisfying Guy's fleeting unstated wish?) and then attempts to frame Guy for it after Guy refuses to "repay" him the favor by murdering his father. *Vertigo* and *Psycho* feature Hitchcock's interest in madness and doubles, as well as his experimentation with tone, cinematography, editing, and characterization in films in which he also seems to relish depicting the unraveling of a mind and its mutually crushing effects on the self and others. By the 1960s, when Hitchcock is experimenting with the grotesquery of cross-dressing killers, seemingly animated corpses, an avian apocalypse, and neurotic obsessions

with thunderstorms and the color red in *Psycho*, *The Birds*, and *Marnie*, the production code is being scrapped, foreign art films are pouring into American cinemas, and 80 percent of films are either being made by Hollywood's finest in foreign countries ("runaway" productions) or are being financed independently (Cook 512-14).

As David Cook observes, when "Hollywood's financial troubles worsened through the sixties, several commercial forces coalesced to bring" sweeping changes to the American film scene: an increased tolerance for independent (European style) art films; independent producers, like Roger Corman (whose Poe cycle explored the grotesque in the fifties), began promoting young filmmakers (Kubrick, Penn, Lucas, etc.) with their own creative visions; foreign art films (Fellini, Antonioni, Bergman, Bunuel, et al.) began to "appear regularly in first-run theaters all over America"; and film studies courses began to emerge in the college classroom (920-22). Cook also observes a major shift in the movie-watching demographic:

> This audience was composed of the first generation in history that had grown up with the visually, if not intellectually, sophisticated medium of television. Through hours of watching television as children and teenagers, its members knew the language of cinema implicitly, and when filmmakers like Frankenheimer, Lumet, Penn, and Peckinpah began to move out of the studios in the mid- to late-sixties and to employ the New Wave techniques of French and Italian cinemas for the first time

on the American screen, this young audience liked what it saw.
(922)

Cook describes the crumbling of the old structures—the studio, the production code, the changes in the viewing public—as affording an open and wider space (literally and figuratively) within which new filmmakers could experiment. Generic changes through the sixties and seventies in the war film (Kubrick's *Dr. Strangelove,* Coppola's *Apocalypse Now*), the western (the films of Sergio Leone and Sam Peckinpah), the road movie (Penn's *Bonny and Clyde,* Hopper's *Easy Rider*), romantic comedy (Woody Allen films), horror (the films of Toby Hooper, George Romero, Wes Craven), and drama (Altman, Scorsese), etc. reveal heretofore unparalleled experimentation with symbolism, imagery, scoring/use of music, pacing, cinematography, degree and depiction of violence/gore and sexual content, atmosphere and tone in which filmmakers situate extreme images, degree of adherence to genre trends, etc. This is an era when up-and-coming filmmakers already viewed themselves as auteurs; they were film artists who were familiar with film history, foreign film, and movie making and who were ready to make their mark in the form by strategically breaking conventions, by shocking, by carefully depicting life in the extreme—the weird, wild, and terrible—in order to find something good in it or just because it had never before been done that way.[2] This was an era of filmmaking ripe for the grotesque, and it saw David

---

[2] Bordwell and Staiger, in "Historical Implications of the Hollywood Cinema," challenge the degree to which "New Hollywood" breaks the conventions of "Old Hollywood." They point to the "process of stylistic assimilation" to the aesthetics of "international art cinema" among New

Lynch and Terry Gilliam begin their careers in the movies, Burton and the

Coens to follow them a little over a decade later, and it is the presence of the

grotesque in the work of these four filmmakers that this study will focus on.[3]

II: Establishing Shot

Thomson's definition of the grotesque (quoted above) conveys his

attempts to find some common ground in a subject of critical inquiry and

theorization in which common ground is difficult to find. The ambivalent,

oppositional, and contradictory nature that he identifies in his definition of

the grotesque carries over as one of the key features in the wider literature on

---

Hollywood filmmakers as analogous to the workings of a similar process at work in Old Hollywood's integration of the aesthetics of German Expressionism and Soviet montage. Such a move, though it appears to be an aesthetic rift, fits into the narrative of how classical Hollywood cinema has functioned in the past (373). While such an argument provides a nuanced interpretation of this fraught historical "moment," it changes relatively little of the narrative Cook unfolds, though it does provide an argument for the continuity of Classical Hollywood across aesthetic categories rather than locating it necessarily with structures that had sustained it in Old Hollywood.

[3] To some degree, locating the grotesque in contemporary, specifically, "American filmmakers," is a distinction both convenient and artificial. Just as my inclusion of Hitchcock in the brief historical sketch of American filmmaking may be challenged by the mere fact of his British nationality, similar challenges could be made to my treatment of Terry Gilliam as an "American" filmmaker, since his career in film has only intermittently returned him to the United States and since a minority of his films have been funded with American money (the latter of which could also be leveled at the ascription of "American" to some of Lynch's films). While I fully recognize these limitations to the selection of my material, I could defend my choices by pointing to the American citizenship of each filmmaker (none of whom, to my knowledge, has renounced his citizenship), the influence of their films on American cinema, etc. Either way, the convenience of being able to gather the four directors together for the purposes of study outweighs what may amount to the (minor) imprecision of calling them "American."

the subject. In Chapter II, I attempt to provide a thorough examination of the theories of the grotesque that have been prominent in recent scholarship on the subject. Most recent theorization of the grotesque returns to the work of Wolfgang Kayser and Mikhail Bakhtin, who aim their critical gazes in opposite directions at nearly every turn, Kayser toward the grim, malevolent, and modern, and Bakhtin toward the raucous, life-affirming, and medieval/Renaissance. My chapter follows this precedent and extends the discussion from Kayser and Bakhtin to the various attempts to close the gap between them or to banish them to opposite sides of a critical continuum for which there is no bridge.

The subsequent chapters on Tim Burton, Terry Gilliam, Joel and Ethan Coen, and David Lynch build out of facets of grotesque theory. Each chapter begins by delineating a critical direction from within the more eclectic theory chapter (II) and specifying and extending the theoretical approach I will take in interpreting the material. Chapter III focuses on locating a Bakhtinian relationship between the "official" and the "carnival" in Tim Burton's films. Chapter IV explores the connection and overlap of the mythic (in Harpham and Danow), madness (in Foucault's *Madness and Civilization*), and the grotesque as a prominent feature of Terry Gilliam's films. Chapter V interprets physically manifested responses to catastrophe and the acting style through which they are presented in the films of Joel and Ethan Coen as related to Geoffrey Galt Harpham's notion of "the grotesque as interval," a site of alienation and confusion, one to which excessive physicality in the Coens' films point (14-15). Chapter VI investigates the modernist grotesque (as

theorized by Dieter Meindl) in David Lynch's films through figures and
functions (associated with the concepts of the double and the abhuman) that
threaten human and/or subjective identity and that also suggest overlaps
between the uncanny, the gothic, and the grotesque. Finally, Chapter VII
attempts to bring closure, relying on reflections from Theodor Adorno's
Aesthetic Theory and an excerpt from Herman Melville's *Moby-Dick*, by
situating the grotesque, its vagaries and contradictions, with humanity itself.
Throughout this study, my thesis is that the work of these filmmakers
("established" representatives from two generations of contemporary
filmmaking) demonstrates a varied but consistent engagement and
experimentation with the grotesque.

III: Matte Shot: Auteur/Grotesque

Filmmaking is, almost necessarily, a collaborative art form. Even so,
the four filmmakers I have selected for this study (one of them, in fact, being a
pair of collaborating brothers with a seemingly consistent and unitary artistic
vision) have achieved auteur status to such a degree that their films often bear
their names in commercials and advertisements as a "brand name," inviting
potential viewers to come see the next installment "from the mind of" Tim
Burton, the Coen Brothers, Terry Gilliam, or David Lynch. Each filmmaker (or
in the Coens' case, pair of filmmakers) has repeatedly collaborated with some
of the same writers or co-writers, producers, cinematographers, etc., but this

is evidence that has fueled arguments for or against auteurist approaches to their work.

This study of the grotesque in the films of these directors is an auteurist approach: I am "looking for stylistic and thematic connections from film to film," and, at least to some degree, I am interested in "discovering a worldview, a philosophy" that seems to extend across the breadth of their films (Grant 57). But I am aware of the debates in the back- and foreground of such an approach, debates which Barry Keith Grant sets out nicely and succinctly in *Film Genre: From Iconography to Ideology* (56-79). If my approach is from the perspective of auteur criticism, however, it is a "soft" auteurism, one balanced by an acknowledgement and appreciation of the wider economic, political, and ideological challenges to it, as well as of the contributions of the various collaborators who bring a film to life. Further, if an auteurist approach is interested in "discovering a worldview, a philosophy" in the works of a filmmaker (57), and if the worldview I find is one that demonstrates a particularly consistent engagement with the grotesque—a philosophy that extends, not only across the works of one director or directorial team, but also across the works of at least three others—then the auteurism of this study is one that is also balanced by wider aesthetic concerns that place any artist within an aesthetic/cultural heritage—the history of the grotesque in art—one which must be acknowledged and interpreted along with any individual artist's navigation of it.

CHAPTER II

THEORIZING THE GROTESQUE: ART, BEING, AND CONTRAST

"Glaucon: It is a strange image you are describing . . ."

—Plato, *Republic*, Book 7, 515a.4

"Opposition is true Friendship."

—William Blake, *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*

In a tin box the grit of her—

ash and bone. The biscuits

are fluffy today. . .

—Allison Pelegrin, from "Funeral Dawn."

I: The Grotesque and Theory: Beginning When There Is No Beginning

There is no single comprehensive theory of the grotesque that

accommodates the presence of the swirl and undulation of the often divergent

or contradictory theories and definitions associated with the term. There has

been, among such attempts in criticism and theory, associated with a number

of disciplines (literature, painting/visual arts, cultural studies, anthropology,

psychology, philosophy, theology, to name a few), as much agreement as

disagreement about what the grotesque is or what its basic principles or effects are, among other questions that arise around it. Further, a starting-place for a concentrated effort at discussing the grotesque with any seriousness also proves difficult, as Geoffrey Galt Harpham notes in *On the Grotesque: Strategies of Contradiction in Art and Literature*:

> Whether considered as a pattern of energy or as a psychological phenomenon, [the grotesque] is anything but clear. Whereas most ideas are coherent at the core and fuzzy around the edges, the grotesque is the reverse: it is relatively easy to recognize "in" a work of art, but quite difficult to apprehend the grotesque directly. Curiously, it remains elusive despite the fact that it is unchanging. Although it appears in various guises, it is as independent of them as a wave is of water, for it is somehow always recognizable as itself. Most curious of all, it has no history capable of being narrated, for it never began anywhere. (xvi)

In light of this fundamental complication, many theorists/critics (including Harpham) include as an initial component of their studies an excavation of the word itself, stalking the word "grotesque" and its roots, mutations, and derivatives through the history of its uses in texts. This also proves to be a kind of false foundation, for, as Harpham observes, the first objects to earn the attribution of the term, wall frescoes in Nero's Golden Palace, were not to be described as such until the palace itself was exhumed from its fifteen-hundred-year repose around 1480, which would mean that

the first application of the word "grotesque" nearly coincides with the
(perhaps arbitrary) borderline between the late medieval and the early
modern periods (23). Thus at its inception, the word is born out of an
aesthetic or ideological conflict between ideas associated with a burgeoning
modernity and those reflected in the ancient artifacts from a culture in the
remote past. Wolfgang Kayser cites the word "*grotta* (cave)" as the root of
various applications of "grotesque," designating these weird, decorative
fusions of plant, animal, and human forms by association with the "cave," the
underground excavation site, where they were discovered, rather than with
the form or content of the images themselves (19-24). The word, then, only
begins to accumulate more specific meaning as a descriptive or aesthetic term
as its original denotative meaning shifts in use from "from the cave" to a
designation applied to various artworks that were taken to be related in some
way to the qualities of those works from the cave. Moreover, as both Kayser
and Harpham write, the style of these ancient frescoes from Nero's palace
predates Rome (Kayser 19-20; Harpham 23): "Despite their inaugural status .
. . [for the grotesque], these frescoes did not represent a new or original style,
for they derived from designs, and reflected ideologies much older than
Rome," which can even be traced back to the most ancient cave paintings, the
"origins of art" (Harpham 23, xvi). "Grotesque," then, as a word is a "modern"
one, and at its inception it is one whose origins seem almost completely
functional or linguistically denotative. The word seems only to become the
basis of a theory when it merges with cultural conflicts aesthetic,
metaphysical, ideological, etc.—a road which leads grotesque detectives back

to the very origins of art, which itself surely has any number of trap-doors and secret passageways to places farther away from the light, taking them deeper and deeper into the dark caves of history.[1]

Rather than to risk founding a theory of the grotesque upon any number of historical "false bottoms," I will begin by considering the two works of modern grotesque theory that catapulted the concept into its current position, as Phillip Thomson observes, as an "object of considerable aesthetic analysis and critical evaluation": Wolfgang Kayser's *The Grotesque in Art and Literature* and Mikhail Bakhtin's *Rabelais and His World* (Harpham xvi-xvii; Thomson 11). While this methodological strategy of beginning with relatively recent theories seems most fitting for a study of the grotesque in contemporary American film, it only deceptively makes for a firmer

---

[1] A notable exception to the notion that some form of the grotesque is as old as history itself, or even as old as human consciousness, is included in a theory propounded by Ewa Kuryluk in *Salome and Judas in the Cave of Sex*. She delimits the grotesque to art produced within the particular historical period, beginning with the unearthing of the ancient frescoes mentioned above during the Renaissance and ending in the nineteenth century. Her theory of the grotesque turns on the notion of "anti-worlds," any number of underground oppositional "worlds" that exist in contradistinction to official culture's accepted ideological "worlds." Such bifurcations include "the anti-worlds of femininity as opposed to the world controlled by men; the anti-world of childhood as contradicted by the world governed by adults; the anti-world of the hidden, forbidden, apocryphal and heretical as different from the universe of the established and sanctioned, canonical and orthodox"; the anti-world of hell and Satan as opposed to the world of heaven and Jesus; and others that fit the form of opposition between dominant culture and subculture (3). I tend to agree with Wilson Yates's critique of Kuryluk in "An Introduction to the Grotesque: Theoretical and Theological Considerations": "[Kuryluk's] periodization of the grotesque remains arbitrarily determined by her delineation of when dominant Western culture reigns and when it breaks down. She, in effect, controls how we shall understand the grotesque by making it that which expresses the particular anti-worlds she delineates vis-à-vis the ruling culture" (38-39). She seems to stack the deck from which she is dealing.

foundation for my attempt to elucidate the concept, for as is well known to those familiar with these texts, Kayser's and Bakhtin's theories, as Harpham reminds, "manage to contradict each other utterly on the most basic premises" (xvii-xviii). Moreover, though these works are "the two most important" and most referred-to texts in subsequent meditations on the grotesque, the very possibility of an authority in the "field" of such studies is put into question, since the grotesque is "so omnipresent that nearly any theory at all can be supported by a judicious choice of examples" (xvii-xviii).

I will initiate my study of the grotesque, building first from Kayser's and Bakhtin's theories and then moving to more recent studies on the concept (Dieter Meindl, David K. Danow, and Geoffrey Galt Harpham), in an attempt to ascertain a theory that is broad enough to encompass the various filmic employments of the grotesque from the group of filmmakers I have selected. I hope, too, that my rendition of grotesque theory will also allow enough conceptual "space" to bring together at least some of the contradictory, divergent, or opposing aspects of the various theories that I put into conversation with one another. My goal is neither to "stack the deck" merely by proposing a theory that seems convincing only according to my judiciously chosen examples, nor is my intent necessarily to present a synthesis of all previous theoretical attempts at defining, delineating, and delimiting the grotesque. Rather, I want to present grotesque theory as a conversation, as a many-sided discussion, one that, like all good conversations, thrives because of the agreements (synthesis) and disagreements (contradictions) among its interlocutors. It is this tension between the parity and disparity, between

unity and contradiction, between agreement and disagreement, which makes this and every good conversation interesting and fruitful. I will also attempt to reframe this conversation by offering summaries of theories that concentrate on how theorists define and employ the term as a critical concept, but also by highlighting how each author theorizes the beginnings (phenomenology) and ends/purposes (teleology) of the grotesque.

II: The Exorcist and the Clown: Wolfgang Kayser and Mikhail Bakhtin

Kayser's and Bakhtin's theories of the grotesque, as I mentioned above, do not hang together well. Kayser's reflects an aesthetic theory influenced by a modernist existentialism, while Bakhtin's theory emerges from an existential premise about the meaning of life that he sees as the animating principle in a multitude of aesthetic works, kinds of performance, cultural events, and phenomena in culture (Meindl 18). Kayser avers,

> That the word "grotesque" applies to three different realms—the creative process, the work of art itself, and its reception—is significant and appropriate as an indication that it has the makings of a basic esthetic category. This threefold aspect is characteristic of the work of art in general which, in direct contrast to other modes of production, is literally "created." Its unique structure enables the work of art to preserve its identity however much of its "cause" it may have absorbed. It has the strength to rise above this "occasion." And finally, in

contradistinction to other and different kinds of use, the work of art is "received." It can only be experienced in the act of reception, regardless of any modifications arising from it. (180)

For Kayser, the grotesque, as an aesthetic category is a kind of metaphor for the "work of art" itself. If one takes into consideration Kayser's attempts to contrast the art-work from other modes of production and interprets his employment of the phrase "work of art" literally—the work that goes into producing the art, which is embodied in the piece of art, as well as the work that the art does in impinging itself upon the receivers of the art, who must do their own work in its terms in order to "experience" it as fully as possible—then one begins to apprehend the nature of the grotesque as art in its most radical form (180). The grotesque reveals art as a seething, tension-ridden cultural cauldron in which each of these three "realms" are in conflict, each to the other. "The grotesque is experienced only in the act of reception," Kayser remarks, though, as an "aesthetic category," contemporary aesthetic and poetic theories necessitate that the concept be theorized as a "comprehensive structural principle of works of art," which entails some kind of discussion or consideration of the creative processes of artists as well. But with the grotesque these realms often cut against one another, for the art in which practitioners of a particular culture may normally express themselves may strike those of another culture as grotesque upon reception "even though structurally there is no reason" for it (181). Kayser notes that the resultant experience of the grotesque from such misunderstandings of artistic structures of foreign cultures still merits the moniker, even if it is "only our

ignorance that justifies our use of the word 'grotesque' in such a case" (181).

He relates that such

> experiences teach us not to define the grotesque exclusively on
> the basis of its effect, although it is really impossible to avoid the
> vicious circle. Even in defining [its] structural properties . . . we
> have to refer to its reception, with which we cannot dispense
> under any circumstances. (181)

It seems that this sense of fundamental uncertainty between the artist, the
art-work, and the receiver of art undermines and opens up theoretical
considerations in aesthetics.

Composer Arthur Schoenberg provides a helpful summation of this
problem in a brief essay entitled "An Artistic Impression":

> An artistic impression is substantially the resultant of two
> components. One, what the work of art gives to the onlooker—
> the other, what he is capable of giving to the work of art. Since
> both are variable magnitudes, the resultant, too, is variable, so
> that with the same work of art it can vary from one individual to
> the next. Thus the effect exerted by a work of art depends only in
> part on the work itself. (189)

Schoenberg goes on to suggest that the "forces" in the art awaken "forces"
within the receiver, which mingle in tension with the forces from the art to be
"sensed by us" as an artistic impression (189). The "forces" of both
components, the art-work and the onlooker/receiver, are, for Schoenberg,
equal in latency and intensity, and the commingling of these forces in tension

"explodes"; this explosion is the artistic impression (189). Further, "the intensity of an artistic impression depends on the onlooker's ability to receive even as he gives" (189).

The point that Kayser makes here in his preliminaries, before coming to his definition of the grotesque, and the point that I am attempting to elucidate using Schoenberg, is that the grotesque as an aesthetic theory bears the same marks of any aesthetic theory: it must consider the work art is and does at every point, from its inception to its reception, and it must acknowledge the multivalent, and often contradictory, results of the unruly dynamism present in the relationship that inheres among the three "realms" of the work of art. Further, the grotesque, as an aesthetic category and "structural principle" that embodies the work of art itself (taken in both literal and figurative senses) in its most radical form does so self-consciously and self-referentially. It embodies the work of art self-consciously because it highlights and polarizes the problematic relations among the "realms" of art, forcing Kayser's own aesthetics into the "vicious circle" of interpretation in which analysis of "structural properties" associated with the grotesque requires an account of the reception of those very properties, the effect they have on the receiver, though this cannot account exclusively for the application of the term "grotesque" (180-81). Thus, the paradox or contradiction of this circular hermeneutic logic sits at the very heart of aesthetics, and, for Kayser, the grotesque realizes this and makes it present in a peculiar way.

The grotesque embodies the work of art self-referentially in its radical depiction of the "createdness" of the work of art, its fictive quality as artifice, which is inscribed within grotesque art in the "repetitions of subject matter," including "monsters," "fabulous creatures," the "fusion of organic and mechanical elements," "human bodies reduced to puppets," "faces frozen into masks," and many other motifs that turn on a certain ambiguity regarding the actual and the artifice (180-83). Such self-referentiality also functions in what Kayser calls the "*Schaffenspoetik*," a "poetics concerned with the creative process," which Kayser sees as a "massive statement about the structure of the grotesque" that operates in many of the frequent literary "encounter[s] with madness" from Romantic and Modernist writers (184). Kayser's theory of the grotesque is, then, a theory of aesthetics, insofar as this term relates to discussions pertaining to the Greek word *aesthesis*—sensual and intellectual perception—though it is perhaps a theory that "stands for" art in the sense I described above by "standing against" art, that is, by offering an alternative logic, structure, and beauty to the ones that dominate "our world" (185).

Kayser claims that "the grotesque is a structure. . . [It] instills fear of life rather than fear of death. Structurally, it presupposes that the categories which apply to our world view become inapplicable" (184-85). The grotesque, for Kayser, alienates people from the world in which they live by making that world absurd for them, turning its order upside down, crippling any sense of certainty or stability, and finally leaving them in the throes of a disorienting, dejecting madness (185). Kayser's grotesque, as critic Dieter Meindl writes, refashions reality as "the sphere of the unfathomable, a familiar world in the

process of dissolution or estrangement, diffusing an aura that instills

insecurity, revulsion and terror" (15). "THE GROTESQUE IS THE

ESTRANGED WORLD," Kayser states dramatically (185 emph. orig.). He

continues this line of thought by observing a key difference between the world

of the grotesque and the world of the fairy tale:

> [V]iewed from the outside, the world of the fairy tale could also
>
> be regarded as strange and alien. Yet its world is not estranged,
>
> that is to say, the elements in it which are familiar and natural to
>
> us do not suddenly turn out to be strange and ominous. It is our
>
> world which must be transformed. Suddenness and surprise are
>
> essential elements of the grotesque. . . . We are so strongly
>
> affected and terrified [by the grotesque in art or literature]
>
> because it is our world which ceases to be reliable, and we feel
>
> that we should be unable to live in this changed world. (185)

So, for Kayser, while fairy tales relate to us an innocuous parallel reality that

calls for us to amend our worldview in order to make meaning in this different

reality, the grotesque relies on the often terrifying disjuncture between our

world, what we know of it, and our ability to interpret it, and the grotesque

world's inimical or indifferent relation to our world (185-86): "The grotesque

world is—and is not—our own world. The ambiguous way in which we are

affected by it results from our awareness that the familiar and apparently

harmonious world is alienated under the impact of abysmal forces, which

break up and shatter its coherence" (37). The ways in which we would

normally orient ourselves become useless because the grotesque thrives on

"the fusion of realms which we know to be separated, the abolition of the law of statistics, the loss of identity, the distortion of 'natural' size and shape, the suspension of the category of objects, the destruction of personality, and the fragmentation of the historical order" (185).

Kayser argues that the grotesque is that aspect of artistic expressions that engages contradictions, sometimes playful and usually dreadful, toward a depiction of the dissolution of the familiar world that is ruined by the "abysmal forces" active in the grotesque (35-36). This form of expression in art inspires a sense of terror and alienation, thus increasing the intensity of various related oppositions in works of art (35-36). He claims that the grotesque thrives in holding contradictory impulses, ideas, and responses together in an uneasy fusion of characteristics in an artistic structure that allows the clashes of these qualities to bear heavily upon readers, preventing them from orienting themselves in the world of the "text," which both is and is not their world (37, 184-86). Kayser observes that the grotesque is especially likely to function in depictions of distorted or dismembered human bodies, madness, violence, and death, for which the world of the fiction offers little "deeper explanation"—or an absurdly unsatisfactory one—both of which serve to heighten tensions for readers by "alienating" them further from explanation (in general) and from a reliability on the explanations offered up for the contradictions in their own world (185-86). For Kayser, the grotesque shocks us with its absurdity, but its resonance effects aftershocks that point both to the depths of the absurdity in the world of the grotesque and to the existential absurdity of our own world as it is reflected through the fun-house

mirrors of grotesque art. Kayser marks this ambiguous sense of uneasiness and disorientation as the central effect of the grotesque.

"But who effects the estrangement of the world, who announces his presence in this overwhelming ominousness?" Kayser asks (185). His answer is interesting and perplexing because he answers the questions by observing that such questions "must remain unanswered" (185). Moreover, Kayser claims that this conundrum transports his discussion to "the final depth of the horror that is inspired by the transformed world" (185). The agent of estrangement in the world of the grotesque must remain "incomprehensible, inexplicable, and impersonal" in order for the grotesque's "essential quality" of mystifying horror to remain intact (185). Kayser calls this force in the grotesque "the objectification of the 'It,' the ghostly 'It,'" which he posits as the "third meaning of the impersonal pronoun," in contrast to the "psychological 'It'" ("it pleases me") and the "cosmic 'It'" ("it rains"), and which, as Kayser explains in a footnote, is the "It" by means of which "we seek to express that which exceeds the sphere of our concepts and which language cannot name" (185, 208). Kayser does seem to apply some metaphysical valuation to this "ghostly 'It,'" in whatever guise it appears in works of the grotesque, in his "final interpretation of the grotesque" as "the demonic aspects of the world":

> In spite of all the helplessness and horror inspired by the dark forces which lurk in and behind our world and have power to estrange it, the truly artistic portrayal effects a secret liberation. The darkness has been sighted, the ominous forces challenged. And thus we arrive at a final interpretation of the grotesque: AN

ATTEMPT TO INVOKE AND SUBDUE THE DEMONIC

ASPECTS OF THE WORLD." (188, emph. orig.)

Thus, Kayser does sense in the grotesque that, despite its terrifying grimness, it ultimately contributes to an aesthetic hopefulness. In this light the "secret liberation" that the grotesque can enact is a kind of aesthetic exorcism of the "ghostly" or "demonic" It, which defies our explanations and throws us into existential disorientation. But, as Wilson Yates observes, Kayser fails to elaborate on his use of the term "demonic," which is little more descriptive than any other of his synonyms in this passage: "dark forces," "darkness," "ominous forces." All beg for further explanation as to the nature of such evil, as well as to the historical or ontological character of these "demonic aspects" (Yates 19). Yates also provides a concise recapitulation of Kayser's grotesque aesthetic: "The experience of the grotesque for Kayser is the experience of that which is negative, strange, and sinister. The positive aspect of the experience, insofar as it exists, is that one can, by invoking 'it,' take it in, subdue, and answer it. . . . But, finally, the grotesque itself has no positive role to play in life: it remains that which is to be overcome" (19-20).

While Kayser appeals mostly to Romantic and Modern art and literature for his conception of the grotesque, the other foundational theorist for relatively recent studies of the grotesque, Russian philosopher Mikhail Bakhtin, grounds his theory in the popular carnival culture of the Middle Ages and Renaissance. Bakhtin writes in *Rabelais and His World*:

> The grotesque image reflects a phenomenon in transformation,
> an as yet unfinished metamorphosis, of death and birth, growth

and becoming. The relation to time is one determining trait of the grotesque image. The other indispensable trait is ambivalence. For in this image we find both poles of transformation, the old and the new, the dying and the procreating, the beginning and the end of the metamorphosis. (24)

For Bakhtin, grotesque images from folk carnival culture function in their contrariety to "classic aesthetics," that is, the theories of beauty formed by the "official" cultural power, which conceive of the "finished, completed man, cleansed, as it were, of all the scoriae of birth and development" (25). The ideal of "classic aesthetics" is the individual, who is "isolated, alone, fenced off from all other bodies" (29). In contrast to this body, the "grotesque body" is "unfinished, outgrows itself, transgresses its own limits" (26). The most important parts of this body are the parts "that are open to the outside world," those "parts through which the world enters the body or emerges from it, or through which the body itself goes out to meet the world" (26).

Bakhtin's theory of the grotesque, then, takes the concept, from the very start, into an existential realm of social reality. The theory develops from this foundation a theory of culture that necessarily treats aesthetics as Bakhtin interprets artistic phenomena that reflect the nature of human existence purported in his theory of the grotesque. For Kayser, the grotesque in art and literature may lead people to considerations of existential questions about the ultimate issues that concern human life, but Bakhtin's notion of the grotesque turns the problem exactly the other way. As Dieter Meindl notes in *American*

Fiction and the Metaphysics of the Grotesque, "The underlying concept of Bakhtin's theory of the grotesque is 'life as a whole,' the totality of life," in which "body and world as well as body and body are involved with one another in constant exchange" (17-18). This is the existential premise for which Bakhtin's "consideration of the contours of the human body" emerge as a semiotics of that body, by which grotesque images in literature, the visual and plastic arts, and other cultural phenomena may signify certain aspects of the connectedness of people with each other and with the world itself (17-18).

Wilson Yates identifies Bakhtin's theoretical work in *Rabelais and His World* as an extension of the philosopher's theory of dialogue and the dialogic imagination. For Bakhtin, Yates remarks,

> language is roughly the same as ideology. Working with a view of the self as essentially social in nature, [Bakhtin] spells out how people carry on in their dialogue and make language, in their discourse and voice, a complex social world that makes up the self. Thus the person is never a single isolated individual creating speech separately from his or her social context, but is always speaking out of that larger social world which is embedded in who the person is. (21)

Dialogue, in Bakhtin's sense, illustrates the dynamism of social identity through language that is "regenerative, corrective, and relative," and it is in this "ongoing process of 'discourse'" that we devise ever-changing ways to imagine and think through our experience of the world, even "as we hear and interpret and revise" ideas in the dialogic realm of discourse (Yates 20). The

"dialogic imagination" is how Bakhtin describes the presence of such dialogue in literature. When he finds the dialogic imagination at work in literature, Bakhtin is able to interpret more certainly what dialogue is and how it functions (Yates 20). Dialogue's enemy is monologue, which, as Gary Saul Morson claims, is "constructed so as to restrict or ignore the dialogic possibility" (qtd. in Yates 20). Monologue attempts to fashion a closed reality that "constricts, abstracts, objectifies, casts the other into social roles, and presumes power over the other" (Yates 20). It stands as the antithesis to dialogue.

The grotesque, or as Bakhtin sometimes calls it, "grotesque realism," the name which he ascribes to literary uses of the aesthetics of carnival, in its purest form, operates according to the dialogic imagination; it images the existential totality of life that Bakhtin's conception of dialogue describes, as Terry Eagleton observes in a discussion of Marxist theory and comedy in *Walter Benjamin or Towards a Revolutionary Criticism*: In employing a "socialist collectivism," Bakhtin

> tries to realize the comic side of the truth that in social dialogue what I say to you somehow always already includes what you say to me, which in turn includes what I have said and may say to you. Bakhtin himself built no less than a whole theory of language around this irony; and in carnival it becomes a "dialogic" decentering of the discrete subject that explodes the authoritarian solemnities of monologue. The discourse of carnival . . . is always speech received back from the other to

whom it was addressed in the first place. . . . [T]he subject [is always already] caught up in a pleasurable play of shifting solidarity with others. (149-50)

Bakhtin observes that, while grotesque realism first flowered "as a system of images created by the medieval culture of folk humour" and reached its summit in Renaissance literature as a genre when bastardized images from folk carnival culture merged in more learned forms of art and literature with motifs from the recently excavated ruins of the ornamental frescoes from Nero's Rome, modernity trudged on, and bourgeois culture took over as a dominating force, replacing a dialogic notion of the "self as social self" with an "atomistic, individualistic view of the self" (Bakhtin, *Rabelais* 31-34; Yates 21). This modern, monologic view of the self assumes that existential authenticity of human identity is possible only insofar as the individual can free itself from the constraints of the social and cultural tethers that "classic" aesthetics sees as outside of and alien to the individual (Yates 21). Bakhtin's thought seems to rely on a kind of dialectical relationship between related binaries: social self and individual self, popular carnival culture and "official" culture, body as "unfinished metamorphosis" and body as completed and isolated, dialogue and monologue, the "classic" (or neoclassical) aesthetics of modernity and grotesque realism and the carnival spirit. The second term of each set, along with related values and social structures ("hierarchy, dogmatism, formalism, and absolutism"), reflect modernity's increasingly bourgeois or totalitarian impulse to "create a world that divides the self from itself, the other, the body, and the larger community," all of which are

"undercut dialogue" (Yates 21). The first term of each set from the short list, along with related values and social structures, reflect Bakhtin's Marxist attempts to theorize ways to "create or recover a world that provides a new way of being," as Wilson Yates puts it (21). He continues, "This new world provides us with the social structures and philosophical understandings for realizing participation rather than representation," and once this new world becomes a real possibility, the grotesque "provides a radical image of dialogue and participation; it carries the revolutionary vision and understanding of a new world freed from bourgeois and totalitarian cultures" (Yates 21-22). In a discussion of "popular-festive forms" associated with the grotesque and its roots in carnival, Bakhtin puts the matter this way: The forms and images of carnival

> look into the future. They present the victory of this future, of the golden age, over the past. This is the victory of all the people's material abundance, freedom, equality, brotherhood. The birth of the new, of the greater and the better, is as indispensable and as inevitable as the death of the old. The one is transferred to the other, the better turns the worse into ridicule and kills it. In the whole of the world and of the people there is no room for fear. For fear can only enter a part that has been separated from the whole. . . This whole speaks in all carnival images . . . , making everyone participate in this awareness. (*Rabelais* 256)

The grotesque world Bakhtin describes in *Rabelais and His World* is the utopian "second life" of the carnival counter-culture in which the popular body conquers the world by achieving union with it (9, 370). Thus, carnival functions historically and politically as a circular, festal dimension in which linear time and official culture and its aesthetics are conquered as well (at least temporarily) by a radical freedom that flourishes with aberrancy, intemperance, and contradiction. Bakhtin theorizes the grotesque, which he alternatively calls the "carnivalesque," through an exhaustive analysis of the medieval and Renaissance culture of popular folk humor that he finds at work in the writings of Rabelais, as well as in the works of Shakespeare, Cervantes, and numerous others in a less concentrated form. He identifies the central purpose of the grotesque with an aesthetics of "degradation," which functions to materialize the abstract, embody the "spiritual," and "transfer every high ceremonial gesture or ritual to the material sphere" by its reliance on the body; on tropes and characters associated with popular carnival forms, the clown and fool especially; and a metaphysics of contradiction and ambivalence that works to make "classic" aesthetics untenable (25). The theory, then, has what Eagleton calls a "somatic root: carnival involves above all a pluralizing and cathecting of the body, dismantling its unity into freshly mobile parts and ceaselessly transgressing its limits" (150). Eagleton continues, "In a collectivizing movement, the individuated body is thrown wide open to its social surroundings, so that its orifices become spaces of erotic interchange with an 'outside' that is somehow always an 'inside' too. A

vulgar shameless materialism of the body—belly, buttocks, anus, genitals—
rides rampant over ruling-class civilities" (150).

From the perspective of the "classic aesthetics" of the culturally
dominant classes, the grotesque images are not only "ambivalent and
contradictory," but they are "ugly, monstrous, and hideous" (Bakhtin,
Rabelais 25). According to Bakhtin's conception, the grotesque attempts to
show in its deployment of such shocking images that "death and renewal are
inseparable in life as a whole, and life as a whole can inspire fear least of all"
(50). For Bakhtin, it is in the "culture of folk humor and the carnival spirit"
where true grotesque raucously thrives as a utopian vision of social and
cosmic human unity and equality (47). It is a festive realm in which human
existence is rooted in the complexities of bodily experience in and of the
world; it defies and surprises the uninitiated by its comprehensive enjoyment
of life; it does not morbidly wallow in Kayser's alienating world of horror.

Bakhtin accuses Kayser of ignoring the "thousand-year-long
development [of the grotesque] of the pre-Romantic era and instead devising
a "distorted interpretation" that relies exclusively on Kayser's own modernist
aesthetic and philosophic sensibilities (Bakhtin, *Rabelais* 46). Bakhtin
continues by observing that in Kayser's study, "The true nature of the
grotesque, which cannot be separated from the culture of folk humor and the
carnival spirit, remains unexplained" (47). Kayser, according to Bakhtin,
reads the history of the grotesque backwardly, beginning with the "modernist
grotesque," which inspires Kayser's notion of the concept, and which has
"almost entirely lost its past memories" in its formalization of its carnival

heritage, and using this exceptional form of the grotesque to judge previous manifestations of it (47). This interpretive methodology leads Kayser to draw lines between the darkness, fear, terror, and alienation in modernist works and what he sees as similar invocations in earlier works (47). Bakhtin offers his critique of Kayser's theory by arguing unsurprising alternative interpretations of Romantic forms of the grotesque, of the importance of the body in grotesque art and literature, of madness, of laughter, and of Kayser's "it," and in his examination Bakhtin reaches the crux of the disagreement: Kayser's "spirit of existentialism" (49). His discussion of Kayser's view of death and the grotesque is characteristic of the nature of the debate and more detailed than some of the other points in the argument:

> Summing up his analysis [Kayser] asserts that "the grotesque expresses not the fear of death but the fear of life." This assertion expressed in the spirit of existentialism, presents first an opposition of life to death. Such an opposition is completely contrary to the system of grotesque imagery, in which death is not a negation of life seen as the great body of all the people but part of the whole—its indispensable component, the condition of a constant renewal and rejuvenation. Death is here always related to birth; the grave is related to the earth's life-giving womb. (50)

Further, if fear for Bakhtin "is the extreme expression of narrow-minded and stupid seriousness, which is defeated by laughter," and if "complete liberty is possible only in the completely fearless world," then another disjuncture

emerges in addition to the disagreement about the metaphysical nature of death and the grotesque: one's orientation to that nature, and, further still, the thorough-going political dimension of Bakhtin's grotesque, which in Kayser's theory never receives much elaboration.

III: Of Gaps and Bridges: Other Theories: Dieter Meindl, David K. Danow, Geoffrey Galt Harpham, and Others

All of the terrifying storm and stress of Kayser's grotesque starkly contradicts Bakhtin's playfully irreverent grotesque carnival aesthetic. And Kayser's "secret liberation" of shining a flashlight on the devil does little to bridge the gap between the theories. An undeniable disconnection remains. "But without this certain collision or complicity between playfulness and seriousness, fun and dread," Dieter Meindl suggests, "the grotesque does not appear to exist" (14). He appeals to John Ruskin's similar point in *The Stones of Venice*:

> [I]t seems to me that the grotesque is, in almost all cases, composed of two elements, one ludicrous, the other fearful; that, as one or the other of these elements prevails, 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. (qtd. in Meindl 14-15)

Further, Meindl proposes that the historical regression of the "carnivalesque

grotesque" (Bakhtin's grotesque), which in romanticism begins to be replaced

or displaced by something more akin to the grotesque as Kayser theorizes it,

leaves much of the "life-affirming message of the grotesque" to fall away:

> Its bright pole becomes hard to locate. This does not mean that
>
> the grotesque ceases to express man's ancient involvement with
>
> general life. But it does mean that the existential message of the
>
> Bakhtinian grotesque, according to which "death is not a
>
> negation of life seen as the great body of all the people but part
>
> of life as a whole," is no longer quite compatible with direct
>
> literary expression. (19)

Modern literature becomes an act of "defining the nature of the individual,"

and the individual is obliterated by "total existence—Being—[which] cancels

out human consciousness" (19). Thus the individual is rightly terrorized when

confronted with "the existential dimension" because it is the "sphere of his or

her annihilation" (19). The modernist grotesque becomes oriented towards its

darker pole of horror and anxiety in order to reflect this change in

consciousness (19). Meindl goes on to observe that, as I noted above, these

two theories emerge from different foundations: "the Kayserian concept . . . is

developed on aesthetic grounds, whereas the Bakhtinian concept works from

an existential premise supplied by the notion of the totality of life . . . in one

grotesque carnival" (18). Meindl attempts to integrate these two foundations,

the aesthetic and the existential, while not dissolving the inherent

contradictions in each of the theories. What emerges is a metaphysics of the grotesque that leans heavily on Heidegger's philosophy.

For Meindl, the "horror-oriented" modernist grotesque recognizes an existential "totality of life," which precedes the self and hedges itself against this conscious subject. This dimension—"life as a whole"—in existing as the context and foundation for the "structure of cognition and consciousness" decenters (or, as Kayser would have it, "alienates") the self, requiring an "epistemological reorientation," which culminates in a "new metaphysics, existential and this-worldly" (28). Heidegger's philosophical work, Meindl claims, represents the culmination of this new metaphysics. Meindl suggests that essentially Heidegger's philosophy displaces humans as subjects, and within subject/object relationships altogether; instead, Heidegger strives to treat "man in his essence," "the primordial element" of humanity (31). Heidegger's philosophy represents the zenith of this line of thought, which Meindl attempts to show in a brief genealogy of philosophical meditation on "the primordial element" from Cartesian metaphysics to Schopenhauer, Bergson, and Nietzsche (29-31). For Heidegger, this "primordial" thought is thought that "descends":

> When thinking of this kind speaks the truth of Being it has
> entrusted itself to what is more essential than all values and all
> types of beings. Thinking does not overcome metaphysics [in
> other words, subjectivist, Cartesian metaphysics] by climbing
> still higher, surmounting it, transcending it somehow or other;
> thinking overcomes metaphysics by climbing back down into the

nearness of the nearest. The descent, particularly where man

has strayed into subjectivity, is more arduous and more

dangerous than the ascent. (qtd. in Meindl 31)

Meindl connects this tendency to plunge beyond the "subject/object

matrix" in metaphysics to the inclination in literature to mine human

"existential depths" by exploring the "nether realm's" web of myths, dreams,

terror, and madness, and "the role of the grotesque in evoking these regions

can hardly be overestimated" (31). This "descending thinking" and "yearning

for the primal" in modern works of art results in a new conception of evil,

death, and aberrancy that explores these regions intending to put their flames

and exotic fancy to imaginative use (32). It is interesting to observe as a side

note that Meindl, in connecting the modern grotesque to such "downward

thinking," effectively makes the original, denotative application of the word

"grotesque," "from the cave (*grotta*)," function metaphorically: the "cave"

toward which such "descending thinking" is oriented is the cave of human

consciousness, the all-but-lost primal impressions of a reality that somehow

defines us but from which we are also alienated.

Meindl, then, brings together the horror and madness of Kayser's

theory and the anarchic joy and sacrilege of Bakhtin's carnival theory without

reconciling them per se. He unites these two concepts of the grotesque, each

with its own vision of the "totality of life" (Being), in a shared "downward"

philosophical trajectory. This "downward" thinking functions to plumb the

depths of prerational human thought in myths, dreams, fears, and stark

realities in order to depict Being itself in its "eternal incomplete unfinished"

act of becoming (Bakhtin, *Rabelais* 52). What is essential about Meindl's marriage of these theories is his suggestion that, to best participate in the grotesque, they must hold their clash, their dissonance, with one another.

The other side to Meindl's theory regards the artist's production. He writes: "The new metaphysics conceives of the oneness and totality of life in contradistinction to the mind and its linguistic capacity. This creates a difficult epistemological position for writers and confronts them with a formidable task" (210). How does the artist portray Being itself? Many modern artists turn to the grotesque, "whose alliance with metaphor, a nonassertoric use of language, circumvents the particularity and unreliability of narrative perspective" (210). These developments, Meindl posits, along with Heidegger's suggestion that the "art work" should display "its createdness [as] part of the created work"—a part which should be expressly experienced and discovered in the work of art itself, not unlike Kayser's *Schaffenspoetik* (Meindl 135, Kayser 184)—leads modernists to exploit the *mort vivant* (Meindl 210). This kind of grotesque presents "human figures whose lives are arrested," which allows artists to capture the, heretofore, ungraspable flux of "life itself" in narrative, but to fashion it in such a way that it bears the marks of its medium in its sense of grotesque absurdity and metaphor, as well as in its narrative self-consciousness (210).

David K. Danow connects the exploration of the nether realm of prerational, or preconscious, human thought to Jung's theory of the archetypes. In his book, *The Spirit of Carnival: Magical Realism and the Grotesque*, Danow devises a theory of the carnivalesque-grotesque, which

effectively polarizes Bakhtin's theory (which he calls "the carnivalesque") and Kayser's theory (which he seems only to get second-hand from Bakhtin and calls "the grotesque") to opposite ends of "a continuum that is . . . representative of . . . an anthropological constant . . . , which is rooted in a certain reiterative human tendency or impulse that makes its appearance in various guises in virtually all cultures" (137). A couple of things here are worth drawing out more clearly within the discussion so far: Danow's notion of a continuum on which the grotesque functions and his definition, or description, of what and where the grotesque is.

First, Danow's appeal to the metaphor of a continuum to conceive of the contrastive aspects of the grotesque, "one ludicrous, the other fearful" to borrow from Ruskin, seems helpful for differentiating between these two intonations of the grotesque in a work, and Meindl seems to invoke something similar in his discussion of the historical regression of the "bright pole" and its replacement with the "dark pole" during the age of romanticism (Meindl 19). Thus both Danow and Meindl take critical steps towards the inclusion of both "poles" within the same continuum of the grotesque. Second, Danow offers yet another definition of what the grotesque is. For Kayser, Bakhtin, and Meindl, the grotesque is, respectively, an aesthetic—a particular way of seeing the world—which can be apprehended in art and literature in various ways; a guiding cultural principle that reflects a worldview of existential totality of being, which boils over into art, literature, and various other cultural phenomena; and an artistic phenomenon that reflects a particular metaphysics concerned with mining the depths of human knowledge and

consciousness. Danow, extending Bakhtin through Jung, treats the grotesque as an "anthropological constant," which is rooted in a basic "human impulse" (137). This is similar to Meindl's Heideggerian metaphysics of the grotesque, but whereas with Meindl, the grotesque reflects some level of adoption of the "new metaphysics" as seen in works of American fiction that bear it out, Danow's claim digs deeper into the cave of consciousness by positing, not only that the arduous concentration on the depths of the primal mind may deliver us in some way from subjectivist metaphysics, but that the grotesque is one way to connect to that primordial "collective consciousness" (Bakhtin), or "collective unconscious" (Jung) (Meindl 31, Danow 137, 150).

Danow extends his theory by establishing a link between Bakhtin's notions of "great time" and "collective consciousness" and Jung's theories of archetypes and the "collective unconscious":

> [Great Time is] the spiritual idea that all utterances are linked, extending from the distant primordial past into the farthest reaches of the future. Thus, in regard to literature, Bakhtin writes: "A work of literature . . . is revealed primarily in the differentiated unity of the culture of the epoch in which it was created, but it cannot be closed off in this epoch: its fullness is revealed only in *great time.*" The same can be said . . . of those archetypal ideas, including carnival, that have achieved a certain longevity, that, according to Jung's thinking, have outlasted all other "texts" in their resilience and productivity as the great

resource of the human psyche—both in its efforts at survival and

in that other great, related project of making art. (149)

Danow identifies a reference to "collective consciousness" in *Rabelais and His*

World in Bakhtin's discussion of the "protagonist of carnival" (whom Bakhtin

identifies as "the people"): "The heart of the matter is not in the subjective

awareness but in the collective consciousness of their eternity, of their earthly,

historic immortality as a people, and of their continual renewal and growth"

(Danow 150; Bakhtin 250). The difference here between Bakhtin's term,

"collective consciousness," and Jung's "collective unconscious" is "essentially

negligible," Danow claims, since, for Jung the nature of archetypes is to

remain unconscious, while the "archetypal representations mediated to us by

the unconscious" frequently surface into consciousness (Danow 150; Jung

653). Danow quotes Jung to conclude his argument: "The concept of the

archetype, which is an indispensable correlate of the idea of the collective

unconscious, indicates the existence of definite forms in the psyche which

seem to be present everywhere" (Jung qtd. in Danow 152). Danow's basic

claim, then, is that the "carnivalesque, with *its* 'indispensable correlate,' the

grotesque, is one such 'definite form' of what Jung also refers to as 'categories

of the imagination' or 'primordial thoughts'" (Danow 152).

In a similar way to Danow, Geoffrey Galt Harpham, in *On the*

Grotesque: Strategies of Contradiction in Art and Literature, appeals to the

grotesque as "a given," or "an element," of the cultural mind, one that remains

the same in essence and function, but one whose constituent features are

shaped by its necessary contrariety to the cultural "conditions of order and

coherence" against which it surfaces (xx). Further, by connecting motifs from
Renaissance and modern grotesques to similar motifs in the frescoes from
Nero's palace, and by drawing an interpretive line between these and
comparable motifs in prehistoric cave drawings (particularly the fusion of
plants or animals with human bodies), Harpham demonstrates the primordial
and mythic character of the grotesque as a basic "element" in the human mind
(65). Wilson Yates observes: "The significance of [Harpham's] theoretical
point is that of seeing the sweep of the grotesque transcending the
Renaissance and its Roman antecedents—indeed, Western culture itself—and,
in turn, seeing such non-Western forms as sources for understanding the
character of the grotesque" (34-35).

Harpham identifies the core of the grotesque to be its place on the
"disorderly margins of Western culture and the aesthetic conventions that
constitute that culture" (xxi). The grotesque, perhaps not unlike Kayser's
notion of the objectification of the "It," is "a species of confusion—that is, it is
defined and recognized in common usage by a certain set of obstacles to
structured thought" (xxi). The word itself serves as a signifier for "entities for
which there is no appropriate noun; and this accords with the sense of formal
disorder we perceive in grotesqueries, in which ontological, generic, or logical
categories are illegitimately jumbled together" (xxi). Harpham carries further
this notion of the grotesque as the illegitimate fusion of opposites to include
not only ontological, generic, and logical categories, but also more totalizing
values of "high" and "low," the normative and the abnormal, the fully formed
and the unformed, the ideal and the degenerate, and often such fusions are

*con*fusions, marked by affinity or antagonism of the fused objects, or indeed sometimes grotesque fusions subsist with seeming indifference to the incongruity of the copresence of high and low (9). Time and size, too, are often markedly irregular, compressed or elongated to accentuate a dysmorphic quality in narrative structure, characterization, depiction, or description in relation to the rest of a text, story, painting, etc., upsetting the formal structure of a work (9, 14).

Harpham presses the concept further, noting that "the grotesque occupies a gap or interval; it is the middle of a narrative of emergent comprehension," or, borrowing from George Santayana's *The Sense of Beauty*, he suggests that the grotesque occupies a "purgatorial stage of understanding during which the object appears as 'a jumble and distortion of other forms,'" which "happens all the time, but the interval is generally so brief, and so easily bridged by memory and anticipation, that we do not recognize it" (15-16). The grotesque object thrives in that interval, elongates it, explodes it, resists its closure, and "impales us on the present moment, emptying the past and forestalling the future" (16). Again, Harpham conceives of the grotesque as something so natural to human consciousness—the gap between the appearance and the apprehension of something—but so foreign to consciousness in its tendency to make that gap its focus, its center; but it does so for a purpose and at a price:

> Fragmented, jumbled, or corrupted representation [in art] leads
> us into the grotesque; and it leads us out of it as well, generating
> the interpretive activity that seeks closure, either in the

discovery of a novel form or in a metaphorical, analogical, or allegorical explanation. However beneficent the effects, the experience does not come cheaply. Baudelaire described the response to the "absolute comic" as an agony, a paroxysm, a swoon; G. Wilson Knight says that the "demonic grin of the incongruous and absurd" in the "grotesque comedy" of *Lear* "wrenches, splits, gashes the mind till it utters the whirling vapourings of lunacy." These are descriptions of the mind poised between death and rebirth, insanity and discovery, rubble and revelation. (18)

This passage is reminiscent of Kayser's approach—the grotesque as an "attempt to invoke and subdue the demonic aspects of the world"—but Harpham's emphasis on interpretation, rather than on exorcism, is somewhat more precise and leaves a more positive role for the grotesque than does Kayser's aesthetic *via negativa* (Kayser 188, Harpham 18). Moreover, while Kayser's approach, in the end, suggests that we, through our artful rendering of it, attempt to "subdue" the "ominous powers" and "incomprehensible forces" that loom large in the grotesque, Harpham turns the matter on its head (Kayser 188). Harpham suggests that it is we who are subdued by the grotesque, and our artistic invocations of it do little to change or chain the demonic; what they do, for Harpham, is to pull us deeper within them, within the troubled liminal space of our own experience of the grotesque (Harpham 18). And it is we who change as a result of the descent into the grottoes of contradiction: "interpretative activity"—imaginative intellectual energy—

emerges as the hard-won wisdom we earn through this dark night of the soul (18). We are only led out of the grotesque when we embrace a hermeneutic wisdom that refuses to give in to the wrenching agony of our experience of it and instead use that psychic energy towards interpreting the wrecked reality it impinges on us.

Harpham unpacks these claims, or indeed packs them quite full, in a conclusion about what he calls the "mythic or primitive" character of the grotesque: "the grotesque consists of the manifest, visible, or unmediated presence of mythic or primitive elements *in* a nonmythic or modern context. It is a formula capable of nearly infinite variation" (51). He elaborates this thesis by spelling out the contradiction more precisely:

> In a mythic narrative . . . the metaphoric is the literal, and nothing inhibits Acteon from becoming a stag, Philomela a bird, Hyacinthus a flower . . . . Traversing categories, myth also ploughs the human into the natural: animals marry, stars form families, and water speaks. At the margin of figurative metaphor and literal myth lies the grotesque, both and neither, a mingling and a unity. (53)

Harpham argues further, relying on Levi-Strauss and Edmund Leach, that while myth thrives on contradiction and uses narrative to mediate it, "our kind of logic is built on an avoidance of contradiction" (53). In a claim close to Danow's Jungianism, Harpham theorizes that the mythic depends on the notion that everything that exists is somehow relatable to everything else: "The primitive mind ceaselessly orders and reorders the world, discovering in

and through myth an all-embracing network of relations binding all things"
(52). Fusions of opposites are necessary because the "mythic mind" seeks the
ultimate unity of everything (52). Invoking Freud's *Beyond the Pleasure
Principle,* Harpham draws connections between the qualities associated with
mythic thinking and those associated with the unconscious, and, merging the
two, he asserts that this mythic unconscious is what emerges as the
imaginative energy that drives the interpretive element in encounters with the
grotesque (67, 18).

Harpham also suggests an interesting political aspect of the grotesque.
Following a theory of the cultural tension between "the high" and "the low" in
Western cultural history in Erich Auerbach's *Mimesis: The Representation of
Reality in Western Literature,* Harpham asserts that "systems of decorum"
(political, cultural, artistic, etc.) "are designed to keep the low and the
marginal in their places" (74). But they necessarily short-circuit because they
assume a notion that meaning and value "are not randomly or equally
distributed throughout the cosmos," leaving such systems to devise methods
that discriminate the meaning of "all that contributed to the stability and
greatness of the state"—mediated through "high style," which was
"grandiloquent, stylized, and highly rhetorical"—from the officially
meaningless and disdainful "reality" of "life of the everyday," which was
associated with the "vulgar and possibly orgiastic processes in the depths"
(73). The customs and traditions associated with such methods always
eventually decay, and they too become meaningless clichés (74).

As this condition is perceived, meaning . . . migrates to the low
or marginal. Revolutions seek to reverse the
meaningful/meaningless opposition, moving from the bottom to
the top in the name of greater fidelity to "reality." Grotesque is a
word for that dynamic state of low-ascending and high-
descending. Those like Bakhtin who espouse the cause of the low
speak of "grotesque realism"; those like Kayser who stand with
the status quo speak of grotesque nightmares. But this crisis in
the sense of reality is created by the systems of decorum we
devise precisely in order to avoid such experiences. (74)

One manner of escaping this problematic is to form a "system of
decorum with indeterminacy or ambivalence" at its center (74). Auerbach
claims that Christianity was one such system, based around a monstrous
Christ figure that essentially fuses the sacred and the profane, pure and
impure, the incandescent light of the transfiguration and the grim and bloody
darkness of the passion, contradictions which can only cohere in the logic of
myths, and Auerbach analyzes this tendency in the content and style Dante,
Rabelais, and others bring into play to fashion their works. Harpham's theory
of the grotesque is an attempt at a similar system of decorum, one that sees
that, as Yates puts it, "On the margin or boundary of experience, expressions
of reality appear to us in grotesque form. They do not 'fit' the world that has
excluded them, but in their grotesqueness they do become a metamorphosis
of it" (41). Further, the "final paradox" of the grotesque entails its own self-
annihilation, for if the grotesque leads to a peculiar kind of wisdom, then

"really to understand the grotesque is to cease to regard it as grotesque. Or, as
Coleridge says in the final line of 'This Lime-Tree Bower My Prison': 'No
sound is dissonant which tells of life'" (76).[2]

IV: Conclusions: The Grotesque, Paradox, and Dialectic

In a recent discussion between Anglican theologian John Milbank and
Slovenian philosopher Slavoj Žižek, collected and published under the title

---

[2] This paradox seems to be a different conclusion than the one
Harpham discusses in the preface to his book, which suggests that a
burgeoning "soupy tolerance" in Western culture is having an effect on the
grotesque by allowing it "in endlessly diluting forms," making it present
"always and everywhere around us" but in "increasingly invisible" ways (xx-
xxi). Interestingly, the statement from the preface is also paradoxical and
further demonstrates, for Harpham, the importance of the grotesque as
revelatory of a kind of hidden knowledge, the realization of which may be
slipping away. Umberto Eco, in his *On Ugliness*, remarks on one such
instantiation of this "soupy tolerance": "We hear repeatedly from all sides that
today we coexist with contrasting models [of beauty and ugliness] because the
opposition beautiful/ugly *no longer has any aesthetic value*: ugly and
beautiful would be two possible options to be experienced neutrally" (426 ital.
orig.). Eco goes on to suggest that such clichés are indeed trite fictions that
seem to misunderstand the relationship between the existential and the
aesthetic, or which see no need for the reconciliation of the two. Eco suggests
that our world is often ugly beyond the cliché notions of "aesthetic relativity,"
even if that ugliness is somehow marginalized, ignored, suppressed, or
repressed (436).
   Many of the images and texts compiled in Eco's book could be or have
been integrated into discussions of the grotesque. His point here seems to be
that the stark and personal reality of these kinds of ugliness in the world are
recent manifestations of ugliness that have plagued human history, and to
which art has responded, and will continue to respond to, in invoking ugliness
in images and words (436-37). By pushing the examples of ugliness to
extremes, Eco makes absurd the notion that such ugliness (or its correlate)
could be experienced neutrally, or, perhaps, could be experienced neutrally
only through some kind of aesthetic detachment and only in works of art,
which, for Eco, seems to miss the significance of art as a signifier of culture,
ultimately making aesthetics itself meaningless.

The Monstrosity of Christ, the "monstrous" fusion of "high" and "low" in the

Christian savior (in essentially the same terms as suggested in Harpham's

discussion of Auerbach), a fusion that exceeds explanation in rational terms

alone, becomes the center around which the debate between the Christian and

the atheist swirls in the contemporary era, which both agree, is defined in part

by the decay of secular reason (17). Midway through, John Milbank resets the

debate as one that begs the question of what kind of logic best suits the

subject:

> [I]s the claimed truth of Christian revelation better presented in
>
> terms of a paradoxical or dialectical logic? Does it announce the
>
> coincidence of the ordinary with the extraordinary, or rather a
>
> necessary journey through the extraordinary illusion, which
>
> finally leaves us in an ordinary forever alienated from the
>
> extraordinary—even if we console ourselves, as Žižek does, with
>
> the thought that this is the most extraordinary thing of all? (177)

Is this question of the kind of logic with which to perceive Christian revelation

not like the question that must arise at some point in a discussion of the

grotesque? Christian revelation must reach this point in the discussion

between these two interlocutors both because of the very different uses to

which a Milbank or a Žižek would put it, but also because, if Auerbach is to be

taken seriously, it is a conceptual system of decorum based on ambivalence

and contradiction with a "monster" at its center (Harpham 74, Žižek and

Milbank 82). Such monsters also populate the ambivalent and contradictory

world of the grotesque, regardless of whose theory one discusses, or what sort

of inflection those monsters receive, or how the presence of monstrosity affects those who find themselves on the receiving end of such art. To discuss the function or use of the grotesque in a more general sense, before suggesting how it can be seen as functioning in contemporary American film (to be addressed in the following chapters), I should first reiterate a few points regarding grotesque theory so far. In order to finally come to some conclusions, I will attempt to close this chapter with an admittedly oversimplified inquiry into its definition and phenomenology that will provide a brief summary of the theories by attempting to issue responses to the questions "What is the grotesque?" and "Where does it come from?" I will then return to the question or consideration with which I began this section: "Where does the grotesque go?" (conceptually) and "By what logic (paradoxical? dialectical?) does it get there?"

Philip Thomson, in his very brief introduction to the concept, *The Grotesque*, defines the term this way: It is "*[t]he unresolved clash of incompatibles in work and response.* It is significant that this clash is paralleled by the ambivalent nature of the abnormal as present in the grotesque: we might consider a secondary definition of the grotesque to be '*the ambivalently abnormal*'" (27 ital. orig.). His "definition," perhaps, over-generalizes, but it does so in a way that reflects the ambivalent vagueness at the core of the problem of defining this slippery concept, which makes it a relatively judicious definition, inviting as much agreement as is possible among the divergent statements in the field. Thomson's definition identifies the sense of the contradictory as the center of the grotesque, which can also be

glimpsed with more or less emphasis and to different ends in each of the theories I have discussed here. Thomson identifies this sense of the contradictory as the animating principle of the grotesque in the work itself as art, which Kayser calls a "structural principle" (Kayser 180); in our emotional response to it, as it elicits conflicting and contradictory emotions (Thomson 5-7); and in the ways in which it clashes with our sense of normalcy and with the stability and certainty of meaning, which could lead into the already traversed byways of cultural aesthetics, ideology, epistemology, mythology, etc. I have also attempted to point out, in addition to "what it is," some of the theoretical assertions that attempt to describe "where the grotesque comes from," though, again, I should like to reiterate the artificiality of these categories, as there is a significant degree of overlap and transposition in setting things out in this manner.

For Kayser, the grotesque arises as an aesthetic principle, which is a figure of sorts for the processes of art itself, and thus it informs the work of art from its inception in/with the artist, through its production as a "structural principle" in the work of art, and on into its reception by viewers/readers that may interpret the work according to an aesthetics of the grotesque (180-85). For Bakhtin, the grotesque (or carnivalesque) goes a step deeper: it emerges from a cultural awareness, especially visible in the Medieval and early Renaissance eras, of the existential relatedness of humans with each other and with the world that surfaced in cultural phenomena (festivals, kinds of humor, uses of language, performance, literary and visual arts, etc.) as well as in theories of aesthetics, which might inform artistic production and

reception. Meindl's theory attempts to situate the grotesque, as it can be recognized in modern American fiction, within a particular (Heideggerian) metaphysical outlook, which philosophically engages in a kind of "downward thinking" that attempts to give precedence to a more organic, prerational, primal, and impulsive kind of thought process, which appeals to myth and raw imagination (31-32). Danow discusses the genesis of the grotesque by applying Bakhtin's concepts of "great time" and "collective consciousness" to the Jungian notion of the "collective unconscious" in order to position the grotesque among the archetypes as an "anthropological constant," which may be activated into consciousness from the collective unconscious through art (137-52). Finally, for Harpham, the grotesque is an elemental aspect of the human mind that reaches back as far as is demonstrable through analyses of culture—back to scratches and drawings on cave walls (65). Harpham's notion of the grotesque is like an archetype, though he avoids restricting it within Jungian terms and instead seems more comfortable with the haziest possible phenomenological explanation of it. Harpham merges the grotesque's phenomenology with epistemology, reaching back to a primordial past and locating the grotesque with the most ancient forms of mythic thinking, which seek to unify reality by relating everything to everything else (52-53). He extends these discussions into a consideration of the grotesque in the modern era by theorizing the subsistence of these mythic forms of thought in the modern mind where they clash with a context for which they are not suited and seem shockingly inappropriate (51). He thus effectively keeps in-tact both Kayser's and Bakhtin's versions of the grotesque in a theory that is not unlike

Meindl's but with this catch: while Meindl asserts the grotesque in terms of a subject's metaphysical understanding of the ancient and primal thoughts of humankind, Harpham's theory treats the grotesque as the object of such consideration, an element within the mind that persists from the dawn of human thinking to the present.

But if the grotesque "goes" anywhere, where does it go, and how does it get there? How do theories of the grotesque delineate the ends for which the concept functions and logic according to which it operates? Thomson's last chapter presents the "Functions and Purposes of the Grotesque" in terms of its impact, "the sudden shock which it causes," that is, as it may be used to jolt the reader/perceiver of the grotesque "out of accustomed ways of perceiving the world and confront him with a radically different, disturbing perspective"; or as it may be used for a "psychological effect"; or to issue an irresolvable tension between comedy and tragedy; or for the sake of experimental "playfulness" with language, characterization, or narrative (58-65).[3]

---

[3] To elucidate the "Psychological Effect" of the grotesque, Thomson relies on Michael Steig's Freudian formulation of the power of the grotesque to arouse anxiety at the same time that it provides some sense of liberation from fear because it manages the uncanny by the comic, in effect, returning us to childhood modes of thought in which threatening material is eased by the comic and vice versa. As an example of "tension and unresolvability," Thomson refers to G. Wilson Knight's essay, "*King Lear* and the Comedy of the Grotesque," but also relates to the works of Beckett and Kafka, according to which he asserts the difference between tragicomedy and the grotesque (Thomson 62): "Tragicomedy points only to the fact that life is alternately comic and tragic, the world is now a vale of tears, now a circus. The grotesque . . . has a harder message. It is that the vale of tears and the circus are one, that tragedy is in some ways comic and all comedy is in some way tragic and pathetic" (Thomson 63).

To extend the discussion beyond these more formal traits or literary effects, I would like to suggest that another tension that seems to be at work in theories of the grotesque is between an orientation towards the political and one that seems more inclined towards a meditative telos, though I do not think these are totalizing tendencies, as any theory that I have mentioned so far or that I intend to mention in the remainder of this study, with the appropriate contextualization, can reflect both poles of such a continuum, as I intend to demonstrate. Further, these different emphases of the political or the meditative seem to work according to a certain emphasis of predominantly dialectical or paradoxical logic (respectively). Kayser, Meindl, and Danow, at first glance, seem to reflect attempts to engage in and advocate the grotesque as a largely meditative strategy for sustained consideration of contradictions according to a paradoxical kind of logic. They treat the grotesque's play with absurdity and contradiction as gateways to metaphysical or anthropological speculation about the nature of human consciousness in a way that leads to further meditation on the character of that consciousness and speculation about what it means to be human, but which never really emerge from the caves of the grotesque.

Bakhtin, on the other hand, by emphasizing the contrariety of the grotesque carnival to the dominant "classic" aesthetics of Medieval and Renaissance Europe, as well as to the "official" culture of that era, offers a dialectically oppositional politics of the body and of the body politic to the ones that dominate in the history of Western culture (*Rabelais* 25-29). He demonstrates how the cultural practices of medieval popular folk humor and

the carnival spirit functioned as a historical and cultural antithesis to the "official" practices and ideologies, and how these factors form a kind of synthesis in grotesque literature as a "literary genre" (Bakhtin 34). This synthesis had become accepted as a formal strategy in writing to the extent that its patterns emerged in the literary culture as generic formal strategies but also remained connected to "carnival-grotesque" in its tendency to "consecrate inventive freedom, to permit the combination of a variety of different elements and their rapprochement, to liberate from the prevailing point of view of the world, from conventions and established truths, from clichés, from all that is humdrum and universally accepted" (34). Bakhtin extends this dialectical reading of history to a broader treatment of the laughter of the people as antithetical to the dominant seriousness that pervades official power, and he uses his study of Rabelais to shed light on the "folk culture of humour belonging to other ages" as a particularly incandescent recapitulation of what is possible in the literary grotesque, a genre which continues to offer the "chance to have a new outlook on the world, to realize the relative nature of all that exists, and to enter a completely new order of things" (474, 34). Thus the political and dialectical receives much emphasis in Bakhtin, as it does in those who have applied and extended his theories to post-colonial and feminist studies, as Alison Milbank notes in an essay on "Divine Beauty and the Grotesque in Dante's *Paradiso*," noting the work of Margaret Miles, Christine Ross, and Mary Russo on feminism and Elizabeth C. Childs and Leonard Cassuto on race and post-colonial studies (155, 166).

Harpham complicates things by offering what may be the most meditative analysis of the grotesque in the group, which relies on irresolvable contradictions of subject matter, imagery, formal properties, modes of thinking, and social/ideological context, and functions according to a self-defined, paradoxical logic that seeks a hidden truth at the "bottom" of the grotesque. This "bottom," however, drops out when Harpham asserts that the hidden truth of the grotesque reaches a point of synthesis that necessarily moves beyond the conflicts of its defining contradictions, birthing a new outlook on the world in even more precise terms than does Bakhtin's theory, though with much of Bakhtin's politics attached (76). Further, Harpham resets Kayser's and Bakhtin's debate about the essential nature of the grotesque as one that emerges from the class positionality of each writer and the constituent points of interest that accompany the bourgeois and the working class intellectual, thus politicizing Kayser's theory by setting it within a dialectical social framework (74). Danow or Meindl, too, could be interpreted according to a more political end that operates according to dialectical logic simply by emphasizing their uses of Bakhtin's theory as significant influences on their own theories. And other works, such as John C. Clark's *The Modern Satiric Grotesque and Its Traditions* and Robert Doty's *Human Concern / Personal Torment*, rely on political tensions of the literary and artistic avant-garde in modern and postmodern literature and visual/plastic arts with the culture at large and its bourgeois sensibilities and its myths of rationalism and individualism, but often towards a shocking stasis (as Thomson describes it) that affords readers / viewers a conceptual

space from which to meditate on their own culture and the artificiality of its myths as a result of the "satiric grotesque" or politically informed utilization of the grotesque in art (Clark 2-4, Doty 5-8).[4]

Perhaps an alternative to the thinly worn notion of the various continuums on which the grotesque appears to function (dark pole / light pole, "high" / "low," form / formless, "official" / popular, paradoxical / dialectical, etc.) would be to think about these sets of ultimately irresolvable contradictions in a way that gives more credence to their incompatibility but that keeps them in relation, that still realizes the close connection between them. I would like to borrow Žižek's rendition of the notion of parallax (which he uses in a different context) as a hermeneutic to think through the concept of the grotesque. In *The Parallax View*, Žižek introduces the logic of a parallax view as the method

> of putting two incompatible phenomena on the same level,
> [which] is strictly analogous to what Kant called "transcendental
> illusion," the illusion of being able to use the same language for
> phenomena which are mutually untranslatable and can be
> grasped only in a kind of parallax view, constantly shifting
> perspective between two points between which no synthesis is

---

[4] I should qualify that the designation of the artists mentioned in Doty's essay and collected and exhibited in the Whitney Museum of American Art for this project and represented in his book as "avant-garde" may be problematic, since the collection includes such diverse material as political cartoons, comic book illustrations, and photographs that may or may not qualify the artists behind them as "avant-garde." However, the impulse behind this collection certainly seems to derive from such a position, and, indeed, most of the work for the exhibition would probably fit quite well with what the term describes.

possible. Thus there is no rapport between the two levels, no
shared space—although they are closely connected, even
identical in a way, they are, as it were, on the opposed sides of a
Moebius strip. . . . [The] parallax gap [represents] the
confrontation of two closely linked perspectives between which
no neutral ground is possible. (4)

In many ways, to suggest such a logic for interpreting the grotesque is not
unlike the claims in Harpham's theory that grotesque images are "liminal"
images in which "opposing processes and assumptions coexist in a single
representation," which figure, occupy, and explode a "gap or interval" in the
Santayanan "narrative of emergent comprehension" that I discussed earlier
(14-15). Accordingly, the grotesque would function as both a kind of illusion, a
language—or to borrow from Kayser, a "structural principle"—that allows for
"incompatible phenomena which are mutually untranslatable" to be grasped
according to a parallax logic, which constantly shifts from one perspective to
another in order to make interpretable phenomena represented in the
grotesque, for which there is no other mediation, for which there is no
synthesis, leaving grotesque art to thrive specifically on the union of things,
ideas, images, values, etc. in contradiction, but also necessitating an
interpretive logic that attempts to analyze this clash-gap as an impossible
coincidence of phenomena that makes possible new interpretations of the
world through a kind of play. To theorize the grotesque accordingly, allows
the possibility of marrying the opposite poles of this or that continuum,
essentially, by reconceiving the continuum as something like the Moebius

strip—by adding two more dimensions to the concept and theorizing the twist that allows both nearly identical relation to concepts that would otherwise be banished to opposite ends of a line and a dimensional boundary that maintains their essential incompatibility. Under the rubric of parallax, paradoxical and dialectical logic may drive theories of the grotesque in contradictory directions, for ends that are incompatible, or to no end at all: what such a method allows is a refocusing of the grotesque—in art, in life, as aesthetics, as philosophy, towards meditation, towards the political, etc.—as an object of interpretation that always already entails interpretations within itself in its uneasy fusion of contradictions within the very gap that seems to make such fusions impossible, ludicrous. A parallax view, then, would not necessarily seek to solve the riddles of the grotesque, or to get lost in its tormenting effects, but, rather, to experience them and pull back from them in a way: to feel the grotesque's effects and refuse them, to suffer its terror or enjoy its sacrilege or to bear the crushing weight of its hardest lessons, but also to negate them in order to create a new interpretive space that relies on position and negation but which lies outside of these by exploding them through interpretation—through imagination—attempting to see from as many angles as possible (Žižek 381-82).

CHAPTER III

TIM BURTON'S TWO WORLDS: INVISIONING THE CARNIVALESQUE

GROTESQUE AND THE OFFICIAL IN BURTON'S FILMS

"Every act of world history was accompanied by a laughing chorus."

—Mikhail Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World*

"How queer everything is today! And yesterday things went on just as usual."

—Lewis Carroll, *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*

I

"The carnivalesque—a liberating mix of comedy and the grotesque in

defiance of the status quo—is a significant component of Burton's work," Ron

Magliozzi writes in one of the introductory essays to the companion book

published for the Museum of Modern Art's recent exhibition of works by

Burton (14). Magliozzi highlights Burton's "affection for the grotesque" and

documents his visual references to festive images associated with the Day of

the Dead, Halloween, and Christmas; to the circus, "exaggerated

manipulation of the body," and "physical mutation"; and to his tendency to

utilize a "bright palette" of primary colors as the "sign of an unnerving, often

sinister, attraction" (13-14). One needs only to recall Burton's take on death in

Beetlejuice and *Tim Burton's Corpse Bride*, his weirdly threatening and amusing incarnations of the Joker or Penguin from *Batman* and *Batman Returns* and their armies of mimes and clowns, or the absurdly "cartoonish" blood-spatter in *Sleepy Hollow* and *Sweeny Todd: The Demon Barber of Fleet Street* in order to see the appropriateness of Magliozzi's invocation of Bakhtin's key terms as a fruitful approach to understanding Burton's film aesthetics (He 21).

When asked in interviews to provide explanations of these tendencies in his films, Burton frequently responds in a manner best summed up this way: "It's about duality" (qtd. in Breskin 79). The poles of such "duality" in Burton's films sometimes shift from one film to the next, but often the director's interest in duality approaches something akin to what Bakhtin describes in his analysis of the relationship between "official" culture and "carnival" culture. In his discussion of festivity in *Rabelais and His World*, Bakhtin demonstrates the duality of the festal dimension in the Middle Ages and its extension into the culture of the Renaissance by contrasting the ideologies associated with official and carnival feasts. While the "official feast asserted all that was stable, unchanging, [and] perennial," such as "the existing hierarchy, the existing religious, political, and moral values, norms, and prohibitions," carnival feasts "celebrated temporary liberation from the prevailing truth and from the established order; it marked the suspension of all hierarchical rank, privileges, norms, and prohibitions" (9-10). The feasts of official culture were marked by a "monolithically serious" tone to which laughter was completely alien, an attitude in which official culture

fundamentally "betrayed and distorted" the real essence of the festive realm. But laughter, the true center of festivity as Bakhtin understands it, thrived as the organizing principle of carnival (10-11). This laughter, though, is not the guffaw at a particular comic event; it is complex: "carnival laughter is the laughter of all people," which is universally aimed in all directions, "at all and everyone, including carnival's own participants," and it is "ambivalent: it is gay, triumphant, and at the same time mocking, deriding" (11-12). Bakhtin claims that the aesthetics of the grotesque is predicated upon this kind of festive laughter, which organizes around itself phenomena associated with the grotesque, such as swearing (and other carnival "speech patterns" of the market place); the "material bodily principle," which "becomes grandiose, exaggerated, immeasurable" in grotesque imagery; the degradation of all that is "high, spiritual, ideal, abstract"; a cyclical, "reproductive" conception of time; and the ambivalent and contradictory nature of grotesquery (11-24). But, from the perspective of the official culture—and its "monolithic" seriousness, hierarchical regalia, polished language, spiritual and intellectual strivings, individuated bodies, historical/linear notion of time, and its "classic" aesthetics—the grotesque reflects a hideously repulsive threat to its ideological rule over culture (21-29). In essence, then, the multivalent tension between official rule and the power of carnival hinges on the ideological/social/ cultural/etc. threat represented in carnival to the standards of the official.

Jenny He, in "An Auteur for All Ages," specifically applies this notion of conflicting worlds in her discussion of how the drama of Burton's films

frequently relies on "two distinct worlds" that "exist simultaneously—whether in the mind only or in an alternate reality such as the netherworld" (18). She goes on to state that "the 'normal' world is exposed as claustrophobic and suffocating while the 'topsy-turvy' world is colorful, imaginative, and revelatory," and often turns out to make more sense (21). Of Burton's work to date, the films that can most benefit from this particular kind of Bakhtinian approach are *Beetlejuice, Batman* and *Batman Returns* (along with his short-lived internet animation experiment in *The World of Stainboy*), his two feature length stop-motion animation films *The Nightmare Before Christmas* and *Corpse Bride*, and *Sleepy Hollow, Ed Wood, Mars Attacks*, and *Planet of the Apes.*[1] The social aspect of the poles of Burton's rendition of "duality" in these films is more pronounced than his similarly conceived use of such devices in *Vincent, Edward Scissorhands, Charlie and the Chocolate Factory, Pee-wee's Big Adventure*, and *Big Fish*. This second group of films all retain some version of the Bakhtinian clash of worlds, but in these works the "other

---

[1] Although there has been some controversy over the degree to which *The Nightmare Before Christmas* is Burton's own film, as it was directed by Henry Selick, whom Burton asked to direct the film while Burton himself was shooting *Batman Returns* and *Ed Wood* (Selick qtd. in Felperin 104). Selick made the film, though Burton, who acted as producer for *Nightmare*, apparently maintained "creative control" over the way in which Selick developed the poem and sketches Burton had produced as a young animator at Disney (Smith and Matthews 147). The film was released under the title *Tim Burton's The Nightmare Before Christmas*, and many on the team (notably, Denise Di Novi, Caroline Thompson, Danny Elfman, Rick Heinrichs, Catherine O'Hara, Glen Shadix, and Paul Ruebens aka Peewee Herman, among others) Selick put together to make the film were Burton regulars (Smith and Matthews 144-45, 149-51). Selick put the matter this way in an interview with Leslie Felperin: "It's as though [Burton] laid the egg, but I sat on it, so it came out looking like both of us" (105). See the note on the auteurist approach (section III) in the introduction.

world" seems to be positioned with, or as He suggests, "in the mind of," a particular character, an individual, rather than an entire culture (18). I will discuss them in the latter part of the chapter.

<center>II</center>

In the world of *Beetlejuice*, as Edwin Page observes in *Gothic Fantasy: The Films of Tim Burton*, "life and death are far from distinct as the opposing sides" in Burton's invocation of duality (42). Further, Burton fuses the comic with the tragic, the ghastly with the amusing, by situating the film "somewhere between fantasy, horror and comedy," as Helmut Merschmann notes in *Tim Burton: The Life and Films of a Visionary Director* (90). Merschmann goes on to argue that Burton's generic defiance in *Beetlejuice* allows him to draw freely on the usually divergent conventions of these genres to suit his purpose in making a film that invites a response "on an intellectual level," as Burton puts it in an interview with Marc Shapiro, to things "that are basically so stupid" (Merschmann 90, Shapiro 8). But without the freedom to traverse from the horrifying to the ludicrous or his freedom to throw both into the same sequence, the film's presentation of the conflicting worlds would suffer. The film would be "stupid" without the ironic "intellectual level" that makes it an interesting movie.

The realm of the dead in *Beetlejuice* reflects a tension between the real freedoms being dead affords characters in the film—most notably represented in the Betelgeuse character, but also in the ability the dead have for

spontaneous metaphysical travel and corporeal malleability—and the fact that the realm of the dead is populated by dead humans, whom the film paints as almost universally boring, even to the point that they have formed a bureaucracy to manage the afterlife as poorly as they had managed things in the realm of the living, complete with typists, complaint departments, waiting rooms, case workers, and instruction manuals for the newly deceased. But these forms of ruling the afterlife are mere fictions. Being dead seems to come with nearly unchecked freedoms, which the character of Betelgeuse embodies; while the governing bureaucracy that presides over day to day existence in the world of the dead are more concerned with keeping those freedoms as much a secret as possible, as evidenced when the Maitland's case-worker, Juno, warns them that they should by no means hire Betelgeuse (the bioexorcist) to help them get rid of the new (living) family that has moved into their house.

Betelgeuse's powers seem almost without limit, and his alienation from the status quo—the bureaucracy of the world of the dead, which may effectively serve as a holdover and comfort from the world of the living— grants him such a freedom that even those who, it would seem, share in his powers (the dead as such) are wary of him. The makeup, dress, and characterization of Betelgeuse, as David Denby puts it, makes him more of "an unsettling, ambiguous cross between a benevolent clown and decadent Weimar era nightclub entertainer" than a ghoul, though, together with some of the visual references in the set design of the world of the dead to Robert Wiene's Expressionist masterpiece, *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari*, Betelgeuse's countenance may also reflect some of the threat (though perhaps parodically)

of the murderous, though somnambulant, Cesare from Wiene's film (38).

Betelgeuse demonstrates his "supernatural strength," as Merschmann

observes, in becoming an enormous snake, as well as when he makes himself

into a kind of one-man circus (93). His head sprouts a macabre merry-go-

round, and his arms unroll like fire hoses to reveal two enormous mallets in

the place of his hands, which the bioexorcist uses in a "prove your strength"

carnival game of his own making to catapult two offensive Manhattanites

through the ceiling of the Maitland's home. The dead Maitlands too

demonstrate this carnivalesque ability to modify their bodies, though to less

effect, in their attempts to scare the living out of their house when Barbara

Maitland decapitates her husband or when they physically pull at their heads,

contorting their faces into grotesquely misshapen visages, not unlike those of

the demonic beasts in Hieronymus Bosch's *The Last Judgment* and *The Altar*

of the Hermits. But all of this, which in horror films would be exploited to

appeal to the fears of audiences, in *Beetlejuice* is placed in the context of a

spoof on the haunted house movie, one in which the ghosts are attempting to

rid their house of the living.

Page comments on Betelgeuse's "overtly sexual nature," which is

highlighted in his "repeated and lustful molestation of Barbara Maitland" and

of the disembodied legs of an unfortunate magician's assistant as well as in his

attempt to wed himself to the Deetzes' young daughter (50). Another critic

points out that Betelgeuse's tendency to belch, fart, and grab at his crotch

align him with what "every twelve-year-old boy wants to be" (qtd. in Page 50).

Michael Keaton, who plays Betelgeuse, commented on the sense of freedom in

playing the character in an interview with David Edelstein: "You write your own reality, you write your own ticket. There are no bars, I can do anything I want under any rationality I want . . . You show up on set and just go fukin' nuts. It was rave acting. You rage for twelve or fourteen hours . . . It was pretty damn cathartic. It was rave and purge acting" (12-13).

Beetlejuice presents "official" culture, such as bureaucratic business culture of the world of the dead, the Wall Street and avant-garde cultures of the Deetzes and their circle, and the provincial middle-class culture of the Maitlands as ultimately absurd, pretentious, or just boring. Betelgeuse is the only character that completely embraces the freedoms afforded to him, and his only goal in the film seems to be enjoyment of those freedoms. Ultimately, Betelgeuse functions as a critique of official culture in accordance with Bakhtin's theory of festive reality: he represents the carnival spirit in his manifestation of "material bodily principle," derisive language patterns, and degradation of the realm of spirits in defiance of the various guises of the official. The Maitland's employment of the freedoms of the dead in service to their attempts to get rid of the Deetzes, and their fear of what lies outside the familiar confines of their own home, undercuts their enjoyment of those freedoms, effectively locking the couple within a purgatory of their own making in the official confines of the social and cultural forms of the living to which they are accustomed. It is they and the Deetzes who must change in order to get along with one another by agreeing to a kind of social contract at the film's end, while Betelgeuse, even after having been eaten by a desert snake (in a reference to David Lynch's *Dune*) in the film's finale, remains the

same wild character in the waiting room scene that ends the movie, as he tries to entertain himself with bad jokes and a prurient sense of eroticism.[2]

Betelgeuse is one of many references that Burton makes in his films to clowns, which also factor, in a rather menacing way, in the protagonist's neurotic hallucinations in *Pee-wee's Big Adventure* and in the construction of the villains in *Batman* and *Batman Returns*. In an interview with David Breskin, Burton provides some explanation for his appeal to clowns and clown-like figures to establish weirdly threatening characters, often without clear motivations for their behaviors: "I grew up with a fascination for people that were dangerous. Why a fascination with clowns? Why do I like clowns so much? Why are they so powerful to children? Probably because they are dangerous" (66). Later in the same interview, Burton picks up a similar thread discussing the duality between Batman and Joker:

> Burton: . . . [The Batman character has] got good impulses, but he's not integrated. And it's about depression. It's about going through life, thinking you're doing something, trying very hard. And the Joker represents somebody who gets to act however he wants.
>
> Breskin: He's playing the Beetlejuice character.

---

[2] The conclusion of the film also situates Betelgeuse with carnival time: his "death" scene in the film is ultimately regenerative; it is a rebirth that brings new opportunity, while the Maitlands seem to impose a kind of historicity on time (even though they share Betelgeuse's metaphysical state), agreeing with the Deetzes to put the past behind them and forge a relationship that they can sustain for the future that is stable and predictable.

Burton: Yeah. There are two kinds of people, even with double personalities. The ones that are fucked and they're still trying to muddle through life, and then the ones that are fucked and get to be completely free, and scary. And they're basically two fantasies. There are two sides. (79-80)

In Mark Salisbury's *Burton on Burton*, the filmmaker describes *Batman* as a "duel of freaks. It's a fight between two disfigured people." He continues,

The Joker is such a great character because there's a complete freedom to him. Any character who operates on the outside of society and is deemed a freak and an outcast then has the freedom to do what they want. The Joker and Betelgeuse can do that in a much more liberating way than, say, Edward Scissorhands, or even Pee-wee, because they're deemed disgusting. They are darker sides of freedom. Insanity is in some scary way the most freedom you can have, because you're not bound by the laws of society. (80)

Burton's clowns, mimes, and crime-world circus performers from *Batman* and *Batman Returns* represent what Bakhtin calls the role of "the constant, accredited representatives of the carnival spirit in everyday life out of carnival season" (*Rabelais* 8). He posits that "clowns and fools" "represented a certain form of life, which was real and ideal at the same time. They stood on the borderline between life and art, in a peculiar midzone as it were" (8). But whereas Bakhtin's medieval clowns were not "eccentrics nor dolts," to describe Burton's Joker or Penguin as "eccentric" would nearly amount to a

compliment. Even as they represent the grotesque "otherness" of carnival life, as well as the freedoms and images with which it is associated, they, at the same time, give credence to a malicious, violent threat that goes beyond the one Bakhtin identifies in the subversive relationship that carnival has with official culture (8, 11-12). Burton's incarnation of the carnivalesque in the Batman films, then, requires a slight adjustment in the application of the theory so far, for while Bakhtin's theory of the carnivalesque grotesque from *Rabelais and His World* still seems as appropriate as it did for *Beetlejuice*'s lighter, more playful tone—for that weirdly humorous, giddily adolescent spark is still present in characterization and in the aspects of art direction, set design, color scheme, etc. that accompany the grotesque characters in all three films—the darker tone and texture of the Batman films requires a theory closer to Dieter Meindl's, which is inclusive of both Bakhtin's "bright pole" as well as Wolfgang Kayser's "darker pole," one more attuned to a modernist grotesque and its preoccupations with violence, alienation, and anxiety (Meindl 19). So, while I will continue to draw out the carnival culture as the freeing social "other" of official culture, as Bakhtin argues, I will attempt to do justice to Burton's shift in tone in the Batman films as well.

Danny Elfman's scores for *Beetlejuice* and *Batman* are signposts of Burton's overall shift in tone towards what Meindl calls the darker pole (19). Edwin Page and Smith and Matthews comment on a "slightly sinister air" in the score for *Beetlejuice* and point to Elfman's reliance on a minor key and an "angular melody" to achieve dissonance; however, they also observe that the frantic, dance-like pacing contrasts the sinister tone with a "bright quality,"

more along the lines of Elfman's work in *Pee-wee's Big Adventure* (Page 32,

Smith and Matthews 66). This juxtaposition of contrasting elements within

the same score, often at the same time, effectively mimics the film's visual and

narrative appeals to a brighter pole of the grotesque, for death and Betelgeuse

are threats but not serious ones. In *Batman*, Elfman's score is markedly more

operatic, darker, and unrelentingly ominous, which garnered for Elfman some

comparisons with Wagner (Smith and Matthews 88). *Batman*'s inclusion of

several pop songs, many composed by Prince, and "department store muzak,"

as Dirk Schaefer remarks in "Danny Elfman's Film Music," are jarring

departures from Elfman's orchestral score and usually serve to musically

connect "the wit, irony and fun" in the film with Joker, in keeping with his

role as a representative of carnival life in an otherwise dismal and oppressive

Gotham City (Schaefer 156; Bakhtin, *Rabelais* 8). The score of *Batman*

Returns (also Elfman's), described by Richard Corliss as "discordantly lush,"

achieves an uneasy synthesis of the two styles, which perhaps contributes to

the film's overt appeals to grotesquery (79). Elfman relies more on orchestral

themes for the major characters; thus, much of the Wagnerian menace

extends from the *Batman* score into sequences in *Batman Returns*, but so do

aspects of the *Beetlejuice* score. Elfman uses variations on circus waltzes as

themes for Penguin, but these musical circus references come across in

disjointed melodies heavily accented with deep brass and woodwinds and off-

beat percussion, relaying musically the sinister spectacle that Penguin and his

low life circus represent in plot and character.

The Joker and Penguin characters subvert attempts, such as Meindl's, however, to situate Bakhtin's and Kayser's theories as representative of bright and dark poles on a continuum of the grotesque, for they are both completely Bakhtin's clown and Kayser's madman. If Joker's or Penguin's function as Bakhtinian clown accounts for their subversive appeal as living symbols of the carnival spirit, and the vibrancy, flamboyancy, vulgarity, freedom from official convention, derisive humor, and bodily principle that accompany it, then it is their function as Kayserian madmen that elucidates their freakish menacing quality. Kayser writes, in *The Grotesque in Art and Literature*,

> In the insane person, human nature itself seems to have taken on ominous overtones. Once more it is as if an impersonal force or alien and inhuman spirit had entered the soul. The encounter with madness is one of the basic experiences of the grotesque which life forces upon us. (184)

Joker's slapstick terrorism in poisoning Gotham's vanity products (shampoos, lotions, hairsprays, makeup), his declaration that "The pen is truly mightier than the sword" after he murders a man with a gaudy feathered pen, or his gassing of patrons/staff in the Flugelheim to enable his unfettered defacement of Gotham's prized art collection reflect the satirical wit and degradation principle of the carnival spirit, but it does so in a context closer to the impersonal, inhuman threat of the grotesquely insane, as do Penguin's biblical-scale revenge plots. Arthur Clayborough seems to suggest some vague correlation between this uncanny, nameless energy and the id of psychoanalysis, a notion that may seem suitable for an interpretive analogy

for the ominous overtones in these villains' versions of clowning: they represent, to apply the psychoanalytic analogy along with Plato's "analogy between the city and the soul," as Simon Blackburn puts it, Gotham City's id (Kayser 185, Clayborough 65, Blackburn 130).

In his *New Introductory Lectures on Psycho-analysis*, Freud describes the id as "a chaos, a cauldron of seething excitations" in which "contrary impulses exist side by side," while the super-ego's task is to "strengthen the ego, to make it more independent . . . , to widen its field of perception and enlarge its organization" so that it can keep the id in check, appropriating from it only what serves its own purposes: "Where id was, there ego shall be" (91-92). If, following the mixed analogy, the villains may represent Gotham's unruly id, then it is Batman himself that figures as Gotham's shadowy super-ego, attempting to work with the city's officials when possible, but overstepping those strictures when necessary, in order to achieve the balance between decadent cravings in the city and the rule of law. In both films, Batman's regulatory function does little more than to reset the status quo of the city when a threat surfaces from within its (criminal or literal) depths.

Bakhtin's critique of Kayser's id-language refers to its "existentialist sense," for which "id is an alien, inhuman power governing the world, men, their life and behavior," and of which "we become aware in the madman" (*Rabelais* 49). He counters by arguing that "the theme of madness is used in the grotesque in quite a different manner—to escape the false "truth of this world" in order to look at the world with eyes free from this "truth" (49). According to this logic, the madness in Joker or Penguin could be interpreted

as merely an absurd exaggeration or extension of the day-to-day life in Gotham: the city's aristocracy masks their power grabs, violent instincts, acts of vengeance, and greed with a façade of respectability, of which Max Shreck is the most obvious example. The difference for the villains—what makes them villains—is their adherence to the carnival spirit—their particular incarnations of impulses that would otherwise be perfectly at home in Gotham City are offensive because of their scale, their lack of seriousness or normalcy, and the fact that they are particularly public (often interrupting official Gotham festivals in both films).

Batman/Bruce Wayne has a lot invested in Gotham City (personally, financially), and he, as aristocrat playboy and the city's "Dark Knight," is also given official sanction to exercise of his baser desires. Batman is not so much the "primary benevolent figure" in the film, as Cory Reed claims in "*Batman Returns*: From the Comic(s) to the Grotesque," as he is an impersonal and ultimately static henchman of the official status quo, to which his alter ego is subject (48). Reed's analysis of the city is insightful, though perhaps overly dramatic: "Burton's Gotham City is an overwhelmingly ugly, oppressive, and depraved metropolis where apocalyptic disorder reigns over a city about to collapse under its own weight" (39). And his observation of the architectural shifts from neo-gothic in *Batman* to largely fascist styles mixed with pop kitsch in *Batman Returns*, as Merschmann also notes, are helpful for pointing at visual/spatial representations of the misdirected aspirations and decadence at work in Gotham City (Reed 39, Merschmann 70-71). But to state that this is "the director's satirical conception of a dysfunctional society in which the only

true justice is vigilantism" simply ignores the role of the superhero in Burton's films (39). Burton's baldest representation of the superhero role is in *The World of Stainboy*, in which the pathetic protagonist, whose only "superpower" is the dark stain he leaves in his wake, serves the city of Burbank by acting as catalyst for the self-destruction of a number of his freak peers, many of whom, like Stainboy himself, originated as characters in Burton's *The Melancholy Death of Oyster Boy & Other Stories*, have disrupted daily life in the suburbs. Burton's perspective on the superhero's relation to his city is obvious at the end of "Chapter Three" when, after Stainboy has out-witted a giant bowling ball and his army of pins at the Burbank Bowl, Sgt. Glendale thanks Stainboy for making the "streets safe again for overweight bowling losers who consider themselves athletes because they can roll a ball in a straight line."

III

The two simplest renditions of Burton's various "duality-centered" films that relate to tensions between official culture and the carnival spirit are his stop-motion animation features, *The Nightmare Before Christmas* and *Corpse Bride*. The drama of both films relies on tensions caused by the grotesque world of the carnival transgressing its boundary with its official opposite. These films make for relatively simple analysis because each world is so clearly distinct from the other, and the grotesque world in each film—

Halloween Town in *The Nightmare Before Christmas* and The Land of the Dead in *Corpse Bride*—is so raucously instilled with images and motifs associated with carnival spirit, and the contrast between the grotesque and the official is so obvious that these aspects of the films are nearly impossible to miss.

Nightmare relies on tensions that arise between Halloween Town and Christmas Town when Jack Skellington, the Pumpkin King of Halloween Town, gets bored with his life's work, and, after discovering Christmas Town, decides to give "Sandy Claws" an involuntary vacation, Jack tacking on Santa's duties for the year in an attempt to stave off his doldrums. The film's grotesquery comes in the form of the variously distorted bodies of the inhabitants of Halloween Town (skeletons, a mad scientist/Frankenstein figure with an external brain, a living doll with detachable parts, zombies, vampires, a hunchback—the usual Halloween fare) and in the superimposition of Halloween imagery and prank pulling on the contexts of Christmas. Of the latter category, a notable sequence is the one in which Jack flies his coffin-sleigh, which is pulled by the reanimated skeletons of reindeer and led by a ghostly dog with a glowing red nose, and delivers bats, vampire dolls, shrunken heads, and a living snake that eats an entire Christmas tree as Christmas presents for the good boys and girls, effectively "subverting the customary iconography of Christmas," as Merschmann puts it (167). The only real threats in the world of *Nightmare* arise from overzealous attempts taken in the "real" world to bring Jack's Christmas haunt to an end by shooting

down his sleigh and by Oogie Boogie's equally overzealous attempts to scare a captive Santa Claus to death by cooking him.

Corpse Bride functions according to a similar sense of duality, and its drama, likewise, relies on transgressions of the boundary that would normally keep the inhabitants of two worlds—in this case the Land of the Living and the Land of the Dead—within their rightful jurisdictions. But *Corpse Bride*'s invocation of the grotesque is more complicated visually and thematically than *Nightmare*'s. As Page remarks, "The land of the living is loosely based on the Victorian era, its houses tightly crammed along the streets and the society tightly crammed into norms of behavior straightjacketed by a firm class system" (230). The classes are visually represented in the puppets used in the film. The stuffy, old world rich have grotesquely oversized heads, markedly grim expressions, and are costumed in simple gray and black clothes that nearly completely hide their bodies, while the nouveau riche are slightly smaller and thinner and seem to adorn themselves in more "fashionable" attire, baroquely accessorizing their ensembles with fans and jewelry. The lower classes are exaggeratedly hunch-backed with distorted bodily proportions. The color scheme of the Land of the Living is limited to grays with hints of sepia tones and light blues here and there, giving the "living" world the visual texture of daguerreotype photography. The Land of the Dead, by contrast, bursts into the film with lush blues, lavenders, greens, and reds. This world is peopled with skeletons and partially rotted corpses, many of which wear brightly colored costumes from which their bones protrude here and there, while others wear little or nothing at all. The corpse bride herself,

in a tattered wedding dress with a plunging neck line, relates, as Stephanie

Zacharek observes, a "disconcertingly erotic" image, as is prominent when the

a long slit or tear in the dress reveals her legs, one of which has rotted away,

exposing her bones (188). Zacharek also observes that, "her lips have a pout

that suggests not even death can fully destroy the human sex drive" (188).

Zacharek's comment hints at a major motif in the film: *Corpse Bride*

elucidates the linkage between life and death by a kind of bodily semiotics.

While the land of the dead seems mostly to be about enjoying the afterlife and

the company there, the raucous abandon of which is obvious in the musical

numbers by General Bonesapart and Mr. Bonejangles (again supplied by

Elfman), who at one point even manipulates marimba music from the boney

bodies of a number of his friends, the bodily (de)composition of the

inhabitants of this place provide visual signs of any number of terrible things

in the Land of the Living. The logic of this aspect of the film is not unlike the

function of Mexican Day of the Dead iconography; as Burton acknowledges in

an interview with Edward Douglass, "it's all about humour, music and

dancing and sort of a celebration of life, in a way, and that always felt more

like a positive approach to things" (184). The Land of the Dead in *Corpse*

Bride is a celebration of life in death—death as a kind of Bakhtinian rebirth,

but one that still bears the marks of life's troubles and grim realities—as

Burton's puppets signify, one with a knife in its head, another with a yawning

hole in its torso, not to mention the number of children running around in

pigtails and sailor suits. The Land of the Dead seems to celebrate the new

freedom death offers—freedom from the tough consequences of those

realities: it is ruled by the carnival spirit through the logic of grotesque imagery that connects this film with the "theme of death as renewal, the combination of death and birth, and the pictures of gay death" and their "liberating and regenerating element of laughter," all of which, Bakhtin reminds, play a role in the aesthetics of the grotesque tradition (*Rabelais* 51).

IV

Sleepy Hollow and *Ed Wood* reveal Burton's tendency to work in the vein of the grotesque in markedly different but related ways. *Sleepy Hollow*, like *Beetlejuice* and *Corpse Bride*, appeals to the worlds of the living and the dead and the transgressions of the boundary that separates them, but does so with imagery and content more closely aligned with the gothic and horror traditions, situating the film closer to Kayser's description of the grotesque than Bakhtin's, though one can still glimpse a liberating "second life" that subverts official rule. In *Sleepy Hollow*, Burton incorporates witchcraft, a topic he toys with as a narrative mechanism in the séance scene in *Beetlejuice* and in the fairytale magic with the wedding ring in *Corpse Bride*, as a life-affirming means by which women may wield power, achieve a kind of union with nature, and subvert the official patriarchies in religion and politics. The opposition between witchcraft and religion in the film finds its narrative center in the construction of the Ichabod Crane character.

Burton provides an evocative set of dream sequences to invent a biography for Crane in which religion and witchcraft clash in the personages

of his father (a pastor) and mother (a witch), leaving him without a mother and without faith in his father's religion. Crane, then, brings into the film the more prominent thematic polarity between superstition (which includes religion and witchcraft) and reason, to which Crane has dedicated his life in lieu of the superstitions that ruined his childhood. Burton's intention in *Sleepy Hollow* is to elucidate this conflict by situating its poles with two absurd character representations of the terms (reason and superstition): "What I liked about the Ichabod character was it was very much a character inside his own head," and this character is "juxtaposed against a character with no head" (Burton qtd. in Salisbury, "Graveyard" 153). Interestingly, these two characters emerge as the film's most notable players in visual and situational grotesquery, mostly to do with the sheer absurdity of the headless horseman figure and the sometimes cartoonish ways in which the heads he lops off spin and roll around before he is able to collect them, as well as with Ichabod Crane's tendency to become the butt the bloody equivalent to pie-in-the-face gags during analytical procedures with his "Cronenbergian surgical implements and complex optical devices that never enable him to see anything" (Newman 157).[3]

The Bakhtinian turn on witchcraft goes largely undeveloped, apart from the scene in which the inhabitants of Sleepy Hollow take refuge from the prowling horseman in the church near the end of the film. At first, it seems

---

[3] Burton comments on the comic aspect of a headless character in an interview with David Mills: "Without a head [the character is], like, great and kind of almost funny. To me, I have no problem showing this movie to kids . . . To me, you see someone without a head, you start to laugh and you get kinda excited and it becomes a fantasy character" (149).

that the horseman is unable to tread on consecrated ground, in line with the

traditions of horror film, but with a couple of quick shots of Katrina Van

Tassel sketching protection spells on the floor of the church, Burton ascribes

the real metaphysical power in the film to the witches. The drama is brought

to an end through the cooperation of reason and superstition, represented by

Katrina Van Tassel and Ichabod Crane. This theme is confirmed when

Ichabod and Katrina are revealed to have become lovers in the film's final

seconds, which show their return to Ichabod's New York City, young Masbath

in tow: they, for different reasons, are alienated from Sleepy Hollow, but

together they form a little family of orphans, a community of outsiders.[4]

This notion becomes the predominant theme in *Ed Wood*, Burton's

biopic of "the alcoholic, heterosexual transvestite and sometime pornographer

known affectionately as 'the world's worst director" (Hoberman 118). Burton's

film traces Wood's career from his attempts to write, produce, and direct his

early plays and films through his premiere for *Plan 9 from Outer Space*, but

Ed Wood centers on the throng of odd-balls that gather around Wood to help

him achieve his creative "vision." Wood's girlfriend, Dolores Fuller, after

---

[4] The cooperation or synthesis or agreement between seeming opposites in Burton's films is a strategy that recurs frequently; just to name a few: in *Frankenweenie* between suburbanites and Victor and Sparky, in *Beetlejuice* between Maitlands and Deetzes (the dead and the living), in *The Nightmare before Christmas* between Santa Claus and the inhabitants of Halloween Town (signified in his well-wishing and gift of snow), in *Planet of the Apes* between humans and their evolutionary ancestors, and in *Corpse Bride* between the living and the dead (in the marriage scene near the end). These endings retain specific meanings according to the contexts in which they emerge in each particular film; but what does seem consistently held over across the films as a group is that such endings tend to bring Burton's films to a comfortable close, not so much a "happy ending" all of the time, but one which most audiences probably find satisfying enough.

discovering Wood's transvesticism and meeting his circle (composed of a hack TV psychic, a colorblind cameraman, an oversized Swedish wrestler, a drag queen, and an aged morphine addict and washed up horror film star), says in an attempt to give Wood a reality check, "Ed, this isn't the real world. You've surrounded yourself with a bunch of weirdoes." Another telling bit of dialogue in the film comes later when Wood's new girlfriend, Kathy O'Hara, comes to his defense: "Eddie's the only guy in town who doesn't pass judgment on people." Wood adds, "That's right. If I did I wouldn't have any friends." In this way, *Ed Wood* demonstrates Burton's attraction to outsiders and the liberation and acceptance available in communities of "weirdoes," a theme he also addresses in *Batman Returns, Nightmare, Corpse Bride*, and *Sleepy Hollow*.

<p style="text-align:center">V</p>

As with many of his films, Burton's *Mars Attacks!* and *Planet of the Apes*, incorporate visual and narrative motifs associated with both Bakhtin's and Kayser's oppositional renditions on what the grotesque entails. Philip Thomson comments on this paradoxical quality of the grotesque, identifying its "unresolvability" as one of its identifying traits: "it is both liberating and tension-producing at the same time"; the grotesque jolts the reader/viewer "out of accustomed ways of perceiving the world and confront[s] him with a radically different, disturbing perspective" (59-61). In the world of *Ed Wood*, for instance, Wood and his weirdoes are *mere* weirdoes from the perspective

of those who identify with the ideology of what is "normal" (even for Hollywood), which Burton demonstrates in depicting the reactions that studio executives, Dolores, potential investors, and most moviegoers have to Wood and his works. But, while viewers of *Ed Wood* may identify or sympathize with the "normal" perspective's tendency to be repulsed, confused, or frustrated by Wood, his gang, and his films, Burton's film requires a shift in perspective for interpreting the weird because the film confronts the viewer with the weird—but from the perspective *of* the weird, a perspective which requires viewers to "read" Wood and his gang in a way that probably cuts against the ways in which "normal" viewers tend to interpret those things that are offensive to normality. It is a film about the "other" from a perspective sympathetic to the "other," a perspective that sees nothing alien in them.

Mars Attacks! and *Planet of the Apes* rely on a similar function of the grotesque, though one that ultimately alienates viewers by playing on their tendency to identify with the least weird point of view offered in the film. Thomson writes that in addition to being used as an "aggressive weapon" in parody and satire, "The shock-effect of the grotesque may also be to bewilder, disorient, to bring the reader up short," in essence, to alienate readers, "to bring the horrifying and disgusting aspects of existence to the surface, there to be rendered less harmful by the introduction of a comic aspect" (58-59). *Mars Attacks!* and *Planet of the Apes* engage these aspects of the grotesque in ways that also fit the Bakhtinian notion of the "otherness" of a social body to the official status quo, and otherness signified in images that, according to the official, dominant culture, seem "horrifying and disgusting" (Bakhtin,

Rabelais 6; Thomson 59).[5] Both films hinge on humans finding themselves in situations where the "other" culture is a kind of parallel but ultimately blank other, a culture upon which humans project their own cultural values in their attempts to orient themselves when confronted with sheer otherness. Kayser's discussion of the grotesque as "the estranged world" brings this notion into focus, as he delineates between strangeness in fairy tales and in the grotesque: "Viewed from the outside, the world of the fairy tale could also be regarded as strange and alien. Yet its world is not estranged, that is to say, the elements in it which are familiar and natural to us do not suddenly turn out to be strange and ominous" (184). This is precisely what Kayser says the grotesque does: "it presupposes that the categories which apply to our world view become inapplicable" when faced with parallels that estrange them (185). This happens in *Mars Attacks!* and *Planet of the Apes* because of the unwillingness or inability of humans to suspend their worldview and leave blank the conceptual space their encounter with the other opens up.

In *Mars Attacks!*, this becomes the engine of the comic destruction of American civilization. In the run-up to the first official meeting with the Martians, professor Donald Kessler, an advisor to the president, assures President Dale that "Logic dictates that, given their extremely high level of

---

[5] Kim Newman refers to the alienation theme in closing his review of *Mars Attacks!*: "Like *Batman Returns* it's the sort of thing that alienates far more people than it converts, but it has so much verve packed into its admittedly incoherent frame that it's hard not to take something cherishable away from it, whether it be the severed heads of Pierce Brosnan and Sarah Jessica Parker shyly kissing as their flying saucer crashes, or the chortling Martians erecting a mammoth and complicated ray-canon to point at one little old lady's head" (145).

technical development, they're an advanced culture, therefore peaceful and enlightened." The government sets up a welcoming ceremony for the Martians where the dignitaries of each culture are to meet for a photo op in the midst of a congregation of onlookers. When a hippy releases a dove to mark the occasion, the Martian Ambassador shoots it with his ray gun, and then Martians level the entire gathering. Kessler and the Americans are confused, so they conclude that the hostility must have been the result of a "cultural misunderstanding." The Martians agree and wish to apologize to congress. But when the Martian ambassador begins incinerating the congress with what obviously seems like joy, Kessler is still perplexed: "Mr. Ambassador, please! What are you doing! This does not make sense! This is not logical!" This sort of satirical slapstick sets the tone of the entire film. Not only do the aliens not act according to Kessler's flawed correlation of "advancement" and "enlightenment," they also seem to bring together a decadent sense of adolescent enjoyment and technological superiority, as evidenced in their experiments with Kessler's and Natalie Lake's living but decapitated heads and their attempts at barbecuing a live herd of cattle—or just adolescent, as in the scenes of Martians peeping on lovers in a trailer, flipping through pornographic magazines, and in expressing a true gamer's elation as they ray people in the streets while their translation devices advise, "Do not run. We are your friends."

Planet of the Apes employs a similar use of the grotesque in a science fiction/action-adventure context. Here, Captain Leo Davidson finds himself the alien on a planet in which the official culture is both markedly primate but

betrays a striking similarity to a version of the human culture with which he is familiar. The difference is that humans are disallowed from participating in any of the luxuries of cultured ape civilization, and the humans are relegated to slavery or life in the desert, outside of the official rule of the civilization. Davidson's worldview cannot account for the shift in perspective, and the film does not force the issue, since Burton provides a *deus ex machina* to allow for his escape, only to suffer the same sense of alienation upon his return to earth with which the film ends. The function of the grotesque is essentially the same for the two films: both rely on Kayser's notion of alienation and estrangement. In both films, aspects of human culture are exaggerated and intensified, but they are also displaced from a recognizable, human context—they are realigned with a culture of monsters whose motivations evade human understanding, and "we are unable to orient ourselves in the alienated world, because it is absurd" (Kayser 185). But Bakhtinian grotesque reminds that perspective makes a difference: Perhaps Bakhtin's notion that grotesque "degradation," which at once debases the "high" and elevates the "low," incarnating grotesque images that bring high and low to a "crossroads," both conceptually and materially, allows for a reading of these films that extends beyond Kayser's rendition of the grotesque as sheer estrangement and disorientation that evades meaning (Bakhtin, *Rabelais* 21 & 24; Kayser 186). Can we not interpret a critique of the false pretenses involved in rationality or the inhibitive nature of the concept of maturity in the Martian excesses of enjoyment, most of which are paralleled in the representation of American political culture in *Mars Attacks!*? Does painting excessive militarism,

oppressive cultural codification, and "race" protectionism as monstrous in *Planet of the Apes* not make the desert-dwelling humans freer, in some sense, than those in the sanitized, technological military culture from which Captain Davidson comes?

VI

Ron Magliozzi, in "Tim Burton: Exercising the Imagination," writes, "creativity is the saving grace of Tim Burton's heroes . . . Their example of imaginative activity, as a response to conditions of disconnection and isolation, is the overarching message of Burton's work" (14). But to leave the statement here is to leave it incomplete, for some of Burton's characters thrive in their alienated states, as these states make them capable of manifesting their imaginations as the reality within which they are isolated, while others, no less eccentric, perhaps, are almost pathologically social. Society seems unable to resist them, and by the time these films end, it may be unclear whether society, as represented in the film, has been radically transformed by such characters' charisma and imagination or the other way around. These themes still fit within the overall motif of a conflict of two worlds, a duality, but in *Vincent, Edward Scissorhands, Charlie and the Chocolate Factory, Pee-wee's Big Adventure,* and *Big Fish,* one of those worlds is or is within an individual subject; the other is the world, and imagination is the mysterious force that drives these two worlds towards some kind of union or separation.

Vincent, Edward Scissorhands, and *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory*

feature Burton's alienated subject, and in each film, part of the drama relies

on this individual's strained relationship to a version of the world that cannot

understand him.[6] This dramatic tension seems to function similarly to

Thomson's notion of "unresolvability," discussed above with reference to *Ed*

Wood, Mars Attacks!, and *Planet of the Apes*, in which some "other" becomes

the "norm" within the world of the film, in one way or another, in order to

effect a jarring shift of perspective from which whatever was judged to be

normal before is now shown with a degree of derision or judgment because of

its alienation of the "weirdoes" whom Burton tends to like. The difference is

that Vincent, Edward, and Wonka are individual subjects—particular

characters—each with his own eccentricities and history, his own emotional

hang-ups, family, dreams, etc. They are not part of a socially outcast group;

---

[6] The two films that could possibly fit in this section that I will mostly ignore are Burton's *Frankenweenie* and *Sweeney Todd: The Demon Barber of Fleet Street*. For while the dog in *Frankenweenie* is certainly misunderstood and vilified as monstrous, it is Victor that effectively figures out the science to resurrect him, mostly out of a sentimental attachment to the dog. In *Sweeney Todd*, it is not Barker/Todd's creativity or imaginative eccentricity that sets the official world against him in the person of Judge Turpin. But when Barker returns as Todd to London, he certainly represents an alienated figure and gains a freedom from the official demands of the civilized world, but only out of blind dedication to revenge. And while his modified barber chair and plan to sell the excess bodies he has around as meat filler in Mrs. Lovett's pies show ingenuity and thoughtfulness, imagination is not really the center of the narrative. So while these two films do indeed appeal to much that qualifies them as grotesque in one way or another—notably, sewing and resurrecting a monstrous dog corpse, only to have it be the same sweet dog it was when it was alive, as well as the stylized blood-letting and grisly human-pie plotline, especially against the backdrop of Mrs. Lovett's middle class beach house aspirations—they do not fit well within the scheme of the grotesque that I see as the overarching motif in Burton's films. These films may serve as a very early and a rather recent "exception to prove the rule."

they do not band together with others like themselves; and to emblematize them for this or that purpose would be to miss something essential about them. Each of them is the alienated "other": each is a particular instantiation of Albert Camus's "stranger to myself and to the world" ("An Absurd Reasoning" 15). The theme of alienation in these films is heightened by Burton's tendency to demonstrate these characters' isolation from the societies in which they find themselves by constructing the film in such a way that viewers experience these "others" from a perspective in which camera position frequently evokes sympathies with representatives from the official culture, which clash with similar strategies used to build identification with these protagonists. Further, Burton's films center on crises in which these characters get caught between who they are and who they want to be, the second of which throws real knowledge of first into question, leaving these characters with a feverish impulse to express as immediately and as boldly as possible.

In this impulse to express—to externalize imagination—these characters communicate both diagetically and extradiagetically. But these expressions, most frequently, serve to alienate the characters further. The boy in *Vincent*, an early Burton short, wishes to be Vincent Price, and for a brief few minutes he is—kind of. The narration (read by none other than Vincent Price) keeps the conditional language of what the boy could or would do— what macabre possibilities he wishes for—but his imagination is expressed as fulfilled desire in stop-frame animation. Viewers see Vincent Molloy become his hero, do his grisly deeds, wear his mustache—his imagined reality

intermittingly cuts into the day-to-day life he lives with his family and pets so distinctly that his cat seems to recognize it at one point, leaping from the boy's arms as he makes his imaginary transformation. His mother is exactly right when she states that Vincent's melancholia and impending insanity are "all in your head," and this seems to be a major point in the film: it is only in and through his imagined life, which for him is his "real" reality, one so powerfully conceived that his imagined world breaks into his day-to-day life, that he can be as he wishes. And it is telling that even after the motherly reminder that he is just a young boy and that he should go outside to play, Vincent seems to treat the mother and her reality check as a mere intrusion in his imagined world of horror and madness.

In *Edward Scissorhands*, the alienation of the title character is multiplied by his ontological separation from humanity, as Slavoj Žižek points out in *Enjoy Your Symptom: Jacques Lacan in Hollywood and Out*: Edward is "a failed, aborted, Frankensteinian monster with scissor-like hands," "a melancholic subject condemned to pure gaze since he knows that touching the beloved equals causing him/her unbearable pain" (149).[7] This aspect of Edward's alienation factors into the narrative when he, in a flashback to his "father's" death, attempts to rouse the old man, and even with the gentlest

---

[7] Edward's constitution as "Frankensteinian monster," as a fusion of man and machine, also appeals to what Kayser sees as a more horrifying modern equivalent to the fusion of plant and animal/human life in earlier grotesque. He argues that the human and the mechanical are "alienated" from their respective natures in their collision in such grotesquery: "The mechanical object is alienated by being brought to life, the human being by being deprived of it" (183). Accordingly, Edward is another in a long line of grotesque man-machines.

touch, he cuts the dead man's face. Again, near the climax of the film, after Edward saves Kevin from being hit by Jim's van, he manically fusses over the boy to see if he is hurt, frightening and cutting him a number of times. He is largely relegated to the role of voyeur, and this is the role to which he returns after his failure to integrate into suburban society as a novelty of the grooming world. At this highpoint of his integration into society, he, like Vincent, is engaged in the process of manifesting his imagination, but in a world that is ultimately unable to bear its weight. He finds no acceptable outlet in suburbia for the angst and despair that his relation to that culture brings him, emotions that he needs to externalize in art, which is his only real means on communication with the other. Burton touches on this idea when he extrapolates Edward's thematic meaning as having to do with "the inability to communicate, the inability to touch, being at odds with yourself" (qtd. in Smith and Matthews 101). If this is true, and if the aesthetic impulse to sculpt with his scissorhands is an attempt to express himself to the culture around him, then Edward's most intensely expressive scene in the film comes near the end when Edward kills Jim, a moment punctuated by Burton's anxious reverse tracking shot, when the wobbling camera shifts to Jim's perspective as Edward runs him through, ending forever his brief foray into a world beyond his own. But this alienated context seems to be exactly what Edward needs in order to thrive, for when he is alone in his dilapidated mansion on the hill, he has the freedom to unleash himself artistically, which viewers experience for the first time through Pegg Boggs near the beginning of the film. The conclusion returns Edward to his previous state, but by this point, he has

achieved a kind of mythic separation from a world in which he does not belong. We see him through an aged Kim: he is unchanged by time, sculpting ice, the chips of which create the magical snowfall in the world below. His isolation is necessary because his imagination requires the complete freedom that only isolation affords him. His imagination cannot be fully expressed without certain pain to others, which would require it to be suppressed or repressed in some form, but in the absence of an immediate relationship with others, he is able to bypass expression as such. In isolation he merely manifests his imagined reality by cutting away those parts of his world that do not line up, and what he cuts away brings magic to the world below.

The duality in *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory* works in a strikingly similar way. Wonka's history with people is a troubled one, leading him to isolate himself as the benevolent ruler of his own candy kingdom, peopled by tiny chocolate addicts who work tirelessly for an endless supply of their drug of choice. The pain caused in Wonka's relationship with the normal world of candy commerce is unidirectional: unlike Edward, Wonka, in the film's back-story (provided by Grandpa Joe), represents no real threat to others. He is merely an eccentric chocolatier who becomes disillusioned after the theft of his trade secrets by insiders cheapens his art. He isolates himself and cuts off all relationships. Burton calls him "the Citizen Kane or Howard Hughes of candy—somebody who was brilliant but then was traumatized and then retreats into their own world" (qtd. in Salisbury, *Burton* 228). But as with Vincent and Edward, it is only within the context of such thoroughgoing alienation that he is able to become "the amazing chocolatier" he wants to be,

constructing an alternative world in which his fantastic candy dreams are realized, a world built on candy logic, where a chocolate river or televisual candy transporter is an end in itself, as Charlie, the only child pure enough to figure it out, realizes: "Candy doesn't have to have a point. That's why it's candy." Wonka's success seems directly related to his isolation—when his imagination is left unfettered, able to make manifest whatever wild candy-laced idea comes into mind.

It would be a mistake to ascribe this theme of the fruitfulness of social alienation to some kind of masturbatory imaginativeness—for in these films, Burton issues rather bighting visions of what is "normal," of how the official culture in each case thwarts and ruins imagination in its attempts to normalize it, use it, or defuse it.[8] The normal, or the status quo, of official culture in these films is judged as inadequate for fostering the flamboyantly imaginative individual subjects in these films—and it is this aspect of the ruling culture that drives these characters towards near total isolation within worlds of their own making. Burton's creative subjects are represented as dangerous because they do not fit within the bounds of the status quo; they represent an imaginativeness that extends beyond the base line assumptions

---

[8] Consider the grotesque representatives of the "normal" world in these films: the patronizing maternal figure in *Vincent* is so tall compared to her son that she literally does not fit inside his perceived world, speaking to her son from a head that does not fit within the frame onscreen; the parodies of the "high school jock" or the almost archetypal variations on the "suburban housewife" in *Edward Scissorhands* (not to mention the sickly pastel houses with their tiny windows and obsessively trimmed overly green yards); or the moralistic variations on the vices of children (and parenting) in *Charley and the Chocolate Factory*, each flawed to monstrous proportions, Charley being the notable exception.

about what is appropriate, reasonable, or useful—about what is normal. As such, they subvert the status quo just by being themselves, but in so doing, they are also alienated by normal, official culture in their attempts to express themselves to a world that is not equipped with a way to make sense of them because it is too small to allow anomalies to thrive in its midst.

Pee-wee's Big Adventure and *Big Fish* reflect similarly constructed characters in more receptive contexts. These films seem to reverse the paradigm between the eccentrically imaginative individual and society. Here, "normal" culture gets sifted through the subject's imaginative reality, often to the extent that the protagonists' strong personalities tend to obfuscate delineations between subjective perception and objective "truth." Ann Lloyd, in her review of *Pee-wee's Big Adventure*, observes that the "preternatural quality to the imagery" invites viewers to "rediscover our capacity for wonder through our identification with Pee-wee's point of view" (qtd. in Smith and Matthews 47). The film is nearly unrelenting in remaining locked within Pee-wee's point of view, and, with few exceptions, by the close of the film, Pee-wee is able to recapitulate the world he finds in his travels, first through actual America and then through the virtual world of "the movies" (in the elaborate chase scene through various soundstages and movie sets), in the wide-ranging circle of new friends who come to see the 007-style film adaptation of his recent life.

And just as the world is for Pee-wee a big room full of toys to play with and enjoy, a notion hinted at in the initial sequence of the film, for Edward Bloom of *Big Fish*, the world is a sequence of tall tales, each featuring Edward

Bloom as the hero that finds a way to tie them all together.[9] Even though

Bloom's serious-minded son, Will, attempts to track down, ground, or

disprove his father's wild biography, he proves unable to do so with any

completeness, leaving the two worlds—the fantastic story-formed world of

Edward Bloom's perception and the stark, colorless world of his son's

"objectivity"—to clash in juxtaposition. Burton vivifies Edward's stories by

slightly and playfully distorting logic and visual proportion and by relying on

an intensely bright color palette, while for those scenes in which Will's point

of view dominates, the world appears in less contrast; colors are muted; the

visual quality reflects a "personality-free style," as Manohla Dargis puts it in

her review (174). Burton, in *Big Fish*, highlights the appeal of the almost

mythic world of Bloom's imagination, one that Will eventually comes around

to appreciating. Taken together, then, Burton's, perhaps bi-polar, rendition of

the duality of the world of imagination over against attempts to explain or

account for events in rational, objective terms—his attempts to contextualize

the imagination and how it does and does not function in relation to the status

quo of "normal" or dominant society/culture, aligns his work with Bakhtin's

description of the purpose of the carnival-grotesque form: "to consecrate

inventive freedom, to permit the combination of a variety of different

---

[9] The content of these tall tales is particularly grotesque; they feature giants, werewolves, witches, mermaids—all figures at home in the grotesque tradition's frequent appeals to images that marry the human form to an animal counterpart, as well as play with the "material bodily principle" in order to image the carnival aesthetic. *Big Fish*'s grotesquery is also particularly Bakhtinian, as even those figures that frequently function as fearful characters in horror, here retain a sense of benevolence amid some kind of misunderstanding that Edward is able to reach because of his social nature and ability to suspend judgment on people.

elements," "to liberate from the prevailing point of view of the world, from conventions and established truths, from clichés, from all that is humdrum and universally accepted" (34).

<div style="text-align:center">

VII

</div>

Burton's most recent film, *Alice in Wonderland*, provides a synthesis of most of the aspects of the Bakhtinian "clash of worlds" motif that I have drawn out in the argument so far. This film reflects Burton's aesthetics, but it also represents, perhaps, his most consistently grotesque film to date. So, I will conclude this chapter in offering an analysis of this film according to the arguments I have already put forth.

Roger Ebert observes that Burton gives Carroll's characters from *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* and *Through the Looking-Glass* an appearance that is "distinctive and original" that avoids relying on earlier versions of the story: "They're grotesques, as they should be, from the hydrocephalic forehead of the Red Queen to Tweedledee and Tweedledum, who seem to have been stepped on." David Edelstein similarly observes, "Burton indulges in his penchant for disproportion," fusing "the circus and the sarcophagus, the magic kingdom and the mausoleum." Edelstein points to the numerous ways in which Burton marries these poles of the beautiful and the terrible, from the topography and gnarled plant life of Wonderland to the post-apocalyptic tea party scene with the Mad Hatter and friends in a desolate, "bombed out" region of Wonderland, from the ghostly pallor and black-red lips of the White

Queen to the elongated card-body of the Knave of Hearts. Edelstein concludes that, for Burton, "there can be no true beauty without a touch or a ton of decay."

Wonderland, or for Burton's film, "Underland," again provides a spectacle that fuses Bakhtinian and Kayserian grotesque in opposition to Alice's "real world" Victorian London, where the film begins. Burton's film reimagines Alice's trip down the rabbit hole as an escape from a surprise engagement ceremony that her mother has arranged in order to marry the nineteen-year-old Alice to a young lord. And in some ways, Underland seems to be Alice's imagined Bakhtinian parody of her own real world situation: she identifies certain parallels between a few of the characters she knows in London and a few she meets in Underland, and the opposing poles of femininity in Underland, signified by the infantile Red Queen and her sister, the White Queen, who represents near enslavement to social decorum and propriety, provide Alice with almost equally stifling, grotesque parodies of models of femininity that her own London offers: Her options are to remain the narcissistic girl who lives in the fantasies of her own mind (as Alice's Aunt does) or be enslaved to Aristocratic sensibility in a marriage of convenience. But ultimately there is no satisfying correlation between the two worlds— London and Underland. Underland is the "estranged" world, one with enough parallels to hint at the familiar, but the recognition of the familiar in such a context proves alienating (Kayser 184-85). Even Alice's friends in Underland prove to be difficult, sometimes infuriating, companions for her. At several points in the film, Alice seems perplexed as to why her imagination would

produce such a weird and disorienting place, but as the film continues, she becomes less certain that Underland is her construction. Burton leaves ambiguous whether or not Alice has imagined Underland—that it is a dream or hallucination—or whether it is her imagination and spunk that make her suited for heroism in such a place.

Alice's closest companion in Underland is the Mad Hatter, whose madness shifts from clownish buffoonery (for which he uses a lilting British accent) to rather menacing and violent rage (delivered in a thick Scottish brogue). The make-up, wig, and costume for the Mad Hatter are particularly clownish—white face, bright pastel touches around the eyes, red-orange Bozo-style wig, and a slightly undersized purplish suit, reminiscent of Joker's and Wonka's. The Hatter leads a gang of freaks—the March Hare, White Rabbit, Dormouse, Cheshire Cat, and Absolem, the hookah-smoking oracle—who serve as friends and protectors to Alice, though sometimes their help and guidance rings of antagonism. These freaks, who throng around the White Queen and her rule of liberation within the bounds of kindness, find parallels in the false freaks who cling to the Red Queen, donning prosthetic noses, ears, bellies, breasts, and goiters to gain her favor, apparently, by keeping her insecurities about her own bulbous head at bay. Again, then, Burton's themes of the mad clown and the gang of freaks, both of which ultimately represent a kind of dangerous freedom and liberating social aesthetic through appeals to the carnival spirit of the grotesque, subvert the ruling powers both of Underland but also of London, for, as Alice reveals in the first act of the film, the aristocracy's attraction to corsets and stockings are unnatural falsities that

ultimately betray her own body and identity, while her wild imagination makes her something of a freak among the youth of polite society. And it is as such a freak that Alice strikes out on her own upon her return to London, after defeating the evils of Underland, into the uncharted territories of her own world.

Like in *Alice in Wonderland*, then, Tim Burton's films generally tend to envision the world as divided, as split between two realities. They imagine worlds in which the official rule of the status quo is upset, degraded, judged, derided, and dethroned by the unruly, raucous menace of the carnival spirit—through the terrible freedom of mad clowns, by visions of the dead and ghoulish that outstrip normal life in vibrancy and texture, in the comradery and liberation that these oddballs and freaks find in each other's company, and in the strange propensity Burton's protagonists have to materialize their wild imaginations in the world around them. But Burton's films also give credence to the overwhelming nature of the normal world of official power and ideology that impinges itself on those that do not fit comfortably within its order, giving rise to alienation and/or sending such outsiders to seek the necessary isolation in which they can dream. Burton's movies nearly always sympathize or identify with the outsiders, weirdoes, and freaks, but his interest in and ability to depict the overbearing nature of the "established truths" of "the way things are" in conventional normalcy do not necessarily take a backseat: His tendency is to reverse the relationship, to reset the terms, to undermine the official side of his perennial duality by giving the spirit of

carnival a permanent foothold through the grotesquery in his films (Bakhtin,

Rabelais 34).

CHAPTER IV

THE MYTHIC AND MADNESS: IMAGINING THE GROTESQUE WITH

TERRY GILLIAM'S FILMS

"The hypothesis before us is simple: the grotesque consists of the manifest,

visible, or unmediated presence of mythic or primitive elements *in* a

nonmythic or modern context."

–Geoffrey Galt Harpham, *On the Grotesque*

"Men are so necessarily mad that not to be mad would amount to another

form of madness."

—Blaise Pascal, *Thoughts*

I

Terry Gilliam plays with a revealing image in his most recent film, *The

Imaginarium of Doctor Parnassus*: in its purest visual form, it is the image of

a stream, some kind of river that appears on screen as Parnassus is telling his

daughter the story of how he made a deal with the devil, Mr. Nick, in order to

regain his youth. After cashing in, Parnassus rides in a gondola with his young

wife through a pale pastel paradise of oversized vegetation, <u>color</u>, haze, and

mist—something out of Monet—a place of impossible vibrancy and serenity—

propelled along by Parnassus' gentlemanly dwarf friend, Percy. As they float

along in apparent bliss, the gondola bumps into something that jars it to a stop. Parnassus looks to find that they have run into a bloated cow corpse floating, half-submerged, in the water. The camera pulls back for a wider shot of the scene to reveal a distinct line in the water where the translucent blue meets the murky brown-red of blood and dirt and water. Gilliam offers a glimpse downstream: the river is filled with corpses; the sky is smoky and red; the trees burnt and skeletal; and there smolders the remains of some recent apocalypse in the distance. Mr. Nick sits on some stairs leading up from the water in this depeopled, anti-paradise, his pant-legs rolled up, splashing his feet in the bloody water, sunning his face with a reflective fan, as he eats fruit from a pile next to him: "What's up, Doc?," he yells, laughing.

Images such as this one occur all over Gilliam's movies, representing intertwined dualisms, each pole of which seeming to rely upon and insinuate the other.[1] Each is married to the other, as in this scene, where the opulence and rejuvenation of one side is only possible because of the ruination and violence of the other. Gilliam's films are particularly interested in finding the places where the poles meet. These are fields of cosmic, metaphysical conflict, but just as much, they are sites of interpersonal, aesthetic, cultural, historical,

---

[1] I will be focusing in this chapter on Gilliam's films, but I will not be including his film work with the Monty Python comedy group. While his animations between the Python sketches and *Monty Python and the Holy Grail,* which Gilliam co-directed with Terry Jones, are certainly grotesque in various ways and merit some scholarship, the Python material seems to reflect more equally shared labor between members of the group than those films in which Gilliam is at the creative helm. Further, Ellen Bishop has already written a rather exhaustive essay on the grotesque in *Holy Grail.* For more on this see Bishop's "Bakhtin, Carnival and Comedy: the New Grotesque in *Monty Python and the Holy Grail.*"

and political conflict. His films find their centers in the connections and disruptions of the relationships between reality and fantasy, reason and mystery, rationality and imagination—between any number of related dualisms. But, in Gilliam's worlds, these relationships are never easily defined or settled. He imagines worlds in which characters' lives are thrown into the territory of the mythic, in a manner not dissimilar to the mythic visions of Yeats or Blake, visions fixated on the necessity of imagining as big as possible; visions that, in highlighting imagination, imply the myths of the past along with a hope for real meaning in the mythic realm of the imagination.

Northrop Frye writes in *Fearful Symmetry: A Study of William Blake*:

> Nearly all of us have felt, at least in childhood, that if we imagine that a thing is so, it therefore either is so or can be made to become so. All of us have to learn that this almost never happens, or happens only in very limited ways; but the visionary, like the child, continues to believe that it always ought to happen. . . . That is why Blake is so full of aphorisms like "If the fool would persist in his folly he would become wise." Such wisdom is based on the fact that imagination creates reality, and as desire is a part of imagination, the world we desire is more real than the world we passively accept. (27)

All of Gilliam's films, in one way or another, deal with the tension that Frye points out: the tensions between the reality of the world of imagination and of "the world we passively accept" (27). The imaginative in his films is connected with the mythic and the paradoxical, just as assuredly as passive

acceptance is associated with rationality and pat answers to difficult questions. A number of Gilliam's films, most notably *Time Bandits, The Adventures of Baron Munchausen, The Brothers Grimm,* and *The Imaginarium of Doctor Parnassus*, are concerned with the reality of the mythic world and the kind of imagination required to see it, but in or against a cultural context that has forgotten or dismissed it or has explained it away. In other films, like *Brazil, The Fisher King, Twelve Monkeys, Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas,* and *Tideland*, Gilliam is more concerned with the crippling effect of characters' attempts at navigating the world of the imagination within the context of a troubling "real" world. These films meditate on variations of the madnesses in which Gilliam's characters lose themselves, to varying degrees, as their circumstances drive them into the mythic, mad worlds of their own imaginations. So, in either of these two directions—the thrust of the imaginative (the mythic) into the "real" world or of the retreat back into the imaginative, away from the "real" world—the films rely on the grotesque to mediate this conflict. In this chapter, then, I will demonstrate Gilliam's use of the grotesque by arguing that two particularly prominent manifestations of the grotesque in his films are visible in his explorations of the mythic and of madness, for him, both topics married to the imagination and its interface with the "real" and metaphysical world.

II

    Citing some overlap with Nietzsche's theory of the Apollonian and the Dionysian impulses in aesthetics, but ultimately concluding that, while the concerns of the carnivalesque and the grotesque are, in a way, parallel to the German philosopher's, David K. Danow, following Bakhtin, observes in *The Carnival Spirit* that the relationship between contraries in grotesque theory ultimately maintains a more "precarious balance between its two principle exponents" than does Nietzsche's dualism (141). Further, Danow argues, relying on Jung and Bakhtin, Nietzsche's theory is, in the end, "stuck in aesthetics" (Jung's phrase), ignoring the "possibility of a religious perspective" as well as something like the "carnival spirit," in which any number of related dualisms (official/unofficial, lawful/unlawful, rational/irrational, etc.) are implied but jumbled up, reversed, played with (142). For Bakhtin and Jung, Danow argues, this level of thinking goes well beyond aesthetics: it is prehistorical, epistemological, anthropological: it relates a deep "reality that provides an inspiration for art," but ultimately must be attributed to "cultural archetypes" (142-43). Danow concludes that the "carnivalesque-grotesque" is akin to the "archetypal image, the motif or mythologem," a "formative principle of instinctive power": it is a "form devoid of content, a sign whose signifier does not readily afford a corresponding signified, until such time as the artist imbues it with meaning" (153).

    The theory turned this way may account for some of the formal principles of the grotesque referred to in chapter II. Phillip Thomson

discusses the grotesque's "gratuitous mixing together of incompatible elements for its own sake," which may also be implied in Kayser's variations on the grotesque as a "comprehensive structural principle" (Thomson 3; Kayser 180).[2] Danow's theory may, too, contribute to a deeper understanding of the varying experiences of the grotesque in the acts of production and reception.[3] This makes some interpretive sense of how the grotesque can function comically in Gilliam's *Jabberwocky* in the 20th century and in some religious mode in the paintings of Breughel and Bosch in the 16th, but also how Gilliam could think of his *Jabberwocky* "as an homage to Breughel and Bosch" (Christie 72). If the grotesque represents a form waiting for its content, then that content is capable of quite a range of variation and value ascription, depending not only on the artist who attempts to imbue it with meaning, as Danow remarks, but also on those who "receive" it, interpret it, which, in turn, depends on the critical toolbox and cultural values according to which they make their judgments.

Harpham's quote above, the epigram that begins this chapter, posits the copresence of what he calls "mythic" and "primitive" elements similarly to how Danow discusses Jung's concepts of the "archetypal image" and "the

---

[2] A number of these variations—animal monstrosities, the "fusion of organic and mechanical elements," "human bodies reduced to" inanimate objects, and even "the encounter with madness"—can be interpreted as fitting within Thomson's conception of "gratuitous mixing together of incompatible elements for its own sake" (Kayser 181-84; Thomson 3).

[3] I am thinking here of Kayser's discussion of the experience of the grotesque in the act of reception of the culturally "unfamiliar" (181). He discusses the possible disjuncture between the producer's intention in making art and its possible reception as grotesque by those unaffiliated with the cultural vocabulary of images. Thomson's notion of the "unintentional grotesque" may also fit here (65).

mythologem," each invoking Jung and Bakhtin to make his case (Harpham 51; Danow 153). Harpham claims that the grotesque consists in the mismatch of such phenomena within a context that seems incapable of understanding it according to its defining qualities but instead interprets through a "nonmythic," "modern" lens (Harpham 51). He argues that whereas modern "logic is built on an avoidance of contradiction," myth not only tolerates it, "but seeks it out and mediates it through narrative" (53). Harpham, invoking Levi-Strauss and Edmund Leach, contends that myth serves the purpose of mediating oppositions, reconciling conflict by "subtly compelling assent to both propositions" (53). Whereas modern thinking attempts to sidestep contradiction by "assigning hierarchies of meaning," mythic thinking protests "against the idea that anything can be meaningless," especially corporeal experience (Levi-Strauss qtd. in Harpham 54). In rejecting nothing, then, myths are "marked by an immersion in the physical stuff of the world, its liquids, solids, and gases": primitive narratives are distinguishable by their tendency "to treat everything—even the gods, even the dead—as a palpable and living presence" (Harpham 54). Modern thinking, Harpham goes on, has trouble seeing the sacred in what seems to qualify as filth "because we have lost the sense of participation in a living cosmos that renews itself in an organic pattern" (56). In the primitive or mythic mind, though, "fertility is the expression of the life force itself, and issues as naturally from corruption as spring follows winter's death and shoots sprout from fructifying dung" (56).

Harpham's analysis of the mythic has obvious reverberations with Bakhtin's theory of the grotesque, and Harpham recognizes this but is careful

to delineate his critique of Bakhtin's theory of the carnival spirit: "Reading Bakhtin, we may be encouraged to feel that by embracing the grotesque we can regain fullness of meaning, purity of being, and natural innocence, lying breast to breast with the cosmos and with our fellow creatures" (72). Apprehending the grotesque as grotesque, Harpham claims, "stands like a flaming sword barring any return to Paradise; the late medieval world is on the point of requiring the concept—a need Rabelais himself recognized, and, according to Bakhtin, filled" (72). For Harpham, then, Bakhtin's hopefulness is misplaced: "we can see the fate of myth, at about the time the Domus Aurea was discovered, on the brink of becoming 'grotesque,' metamorphosing into an alienated form, a ritualized interval of 'participation' in a lost world" (72). The mythic, which is everywhere "implied in Bakhtin's discourse," even if it is not often referred to, quite literally, becomes "grotesque" as modernity takes a firm hold of western culture and as that culture fails to understand itself any longer in mythic terms (Harpham 74). And now, out of context, the mythic becomes more associated with something like Kayser's attempt "to invoke and subdue the demonic aspects of the world" (Harpham 74; Kayser 188). The grotesque consists in primitive, mythic elements that are necessarily out of joint with nonmythic modernity, which can only understand them as alien, other, monstrous: grotesque (Harpham 51).

III

Gilliam's *Jabberwocky* provides an interesting anomaly to the pattern that besets the rest of the films in his career, for, as John Ashbrook observes in his book *Terry Gilliam*, the film's protagonist, Dennis, "is that rarest of creatures in a Gilliam film, a protagonist with no imagination. His dreams are small and delusional" (26). Gilliam himself sees the film as a clash of fairy tales, as he says in an interview with Bob McCabe in the latter's *Dark Knights and Holy Fools: The Art and Films of Terry Gilliam*:

> In the one fairy tale you've got the little guy who slays the monster and gets the princess and half the kingdom, and that's what we're supposed to all want. The other one is what he really wanted, which is the fat girl next door, not this other stuff. So he doesn't get what he wants and that's what intrigued me about it. The other thing that intrigued me about it was this man with very limited dreams . . . . His dreams are so small and yet he's caught in a world where fairy tale endings are possible, but he doesn't get the happy ending he wants, he gets the fairy tale ending we're all told we all want. (McCabe 69-70)

Gilliam points to the conflict in the film between Dennis' rather modern (American?) dream of mild success through hard work and a dedication to efficiency and convenient love with the "girl next door" and the late medieval world of the film, in which the popular imagination is still "mythic" enough to force its unwilling hero into the fairy tale ending. This conflict is nicely

confirmed in the last shots of the film, as Gilliam tracks Dennis and his new

bride as they ride out of King Bruno's city to the half of the kingdom Dennis

has inadvertently earned, passing Griselda (the "fat girl" next door), who is

now dressed in a nun's habit screaming, and a street full of well-wishers;

Dennis' protestations are heard as the film concludes with an iris shot and the

sound of a prison door clinking shut. The world imprisons him in a mythic

tale that he is too modern to dream for himself, but Gilliam also refers to the

seeds of the burgeoning modernity that Dennis represents but which the

popular culture of *Jabberwocky* has not yet fully embraced.

Jabberwocky is set perhaps on the cusp of the late medieval and early

modern periods—medieval enough for the staples of medievalism—the king,

the castle, the joust, the dragon—to be prominent and important in the

narrative of the film, but modern enough for them to bear a heavy dose of

filmic irony. King Bruno, "the Questionable," is ancient, and he spends much

of his screen time hacking; he is dressed in moth-eaten royal rags; his castle is

literally crumbling more and more as the movie's narrative moves forward,

the entire east tower collapsing just after Bruno promises it to his daughter

and her future husband. In the king's first appearance on screen, Gilliam robs

him of any shred of royal dignity: Bruno is in bed, writhing in a nightmare,

comically alternating between screams and snores, his ass in the air, his belly

hanging out. Later in the film, when his daughter and advisor begin to find the

joust too brutal—after nearly every knight in the kingdom has been

extravagantly maimed by the Black Knight, their blood sprayed all over the

court—Bruno decides to finish the competition by having the knights play

hide and seek, but then when this competition is settled no one can find the winner to tell him of his victory. The modern figures, besides Dennis, are the aristocrats, who are young, silver-tongued, efficient, costumed in rather dashing Renaissance attire. They are also willing to use the fear and piety of the popular mythic mind as a tool to better subjugate the people. But, in the end, in the world of *Jabberwocky*, the myth wins; the popular imagination dreams up a fairy tale success for those who do not want or deserve it.

Perhaps the most prominent element in *Jabberwocky*, beyond but related to the conflict between the medieval and the modern, the mythic and the efficient or politically expedient, are the scatographic elements of the film, another layer in the overall texture of what Alan Brien of the *Sunday Times* calls "an uncannily persuasive Breughelesque portrait of the Middle Ages," adding some comparisons between Gilliam and Fellini and Bergman (qtd. in Thompson 6). The modern peasant dreamer, Dennis, is urinated on a number of times by those in roles representative of the primitive world. There are also a few defecation scenes: in the first, Mr. Fishfinger shits out of an open window into the river below, all the while talking to Dennis, who is attempting to woo Griselda, Fishfinger's daughter. All of the scatography, when taken together with the ways in which bodies, their gases and fluids, their amputated parts and pieces, are all welcome and integrated as part of the organic, primitive life in the film, becomes involved in Gilliam's overall vision of the mythic past of the medieval world, whose imagination was such that it could integrate the body and its functions into culture, and it is precisely this that modern-minded efficiency wants to displace, hide away, within ducts,

perhaps, as in *Brazil,* pinched between walls, for those well-connected or rich enough not to have to be faced with their own excrement. The mythic past in *Jabberwocky* is still alive in the popular mind, and it has a certain liberating affiliation with the body and with the world, and while that mythic story prevails, Gilliam images it as crumbling, sick, and dying. And it is the contours of this demise that will concern him for the rest of his career in filmmaking.

IV

In Gilliam's cinematic world since *Jabberwocky*, modernity is ensconced in the historical setting of the films, but, more importantly, it has largely taken hold within the minds of characters in his worlds. Those with the imaginations capable of conceiving of mythic significance in the world are alienated by their variously modern contexts, whether it is Kevin in *Time Bandits*, Baron Munchausen in *The Adventures of Baron Munchausen*, Jacob Grimm in *The Brothers Grimm*, or Parnassus in *The Imaginarium of Doctor Parnassus*. They are tapped in to a certain depth of mythic reality, but their worlds have little place for such imaginativeness and mock depth as childishness, madness, dreaminess, or as an empty mysticism in a traveling sideshow. But Gilliam, in these four films, focuses in on the validation of such imaginativeness, and in each film he discloses the break of the mythic into the modern.

Time Bandits imagines a contemporary London, obsessed with paltry television game-shows and the use of technology to make bourgeois life easier, figured in the film as "Your Money or Your Life" on the TV in Kevin's home and in the obsession (shared by Evil) with mechanized appliances. All the while, Kevin is lost in books of history and mythology. And this world, quite literally, breaks into his world, first as a knight on horseback that violently emerges from his closet, then as a rag-tag gang of pirate dwarves, rogue worker-angels, armed with God's map of all of the mistakes—the time holes—in the fabric of creation. What ensues is a romp through time—Kevin meets Napoleon on the warpath in 1796; Robin Hood and his band of merry thieves in the Middle Ages; and Agamemnon in ancient Greece; they arrive on the Titanic just in time for it to sink; and they drop through the bottom of the world into the "Time of Legends," before finally battling Evil himself, and eventually meeting the Supreme Being. *Time Bandits* is, to some degree, a children's movie, but Gilliam seems to hold back very little on his visions of history. Further, since our guide is the contemporary Londoner, Kevin, we have a modern context within the frame of the film, as well as a frame-narrative that bookends the film with the modern, "real" world. This context influences much of the history and legend through which Kevin passes on his travels with Gilliam's grotesquery.

With each stop through time, Kevin's travels reveal scenes which are apparently commonplace in each historical/mythical context in which he finds himself, but which to Harpham's "modern mind" would be greeted with disgust, shock, laughter, uneasiness, or some combination of them. In

Napoleon's world, a city burns in ruins; people are being executed in the streets by the dozen. And all of this is paralleled with Napoleon's entrancement in a particularly violent puppet show, admitting when the show stops that his real love is watching "little things hitting each other." In Sherwood Forest, the brutality of the middle ages is signified in a trudge through the thieves' encampment, where ensues an arm-wrestling competition in which the reigning champion is seen, not only beating his opponents, but completely ripping their arms from their bodies and tossing them nonchalantly into a large basket of the severed limbs of past losers. All manner of raucous behavior persists, and Gilliam withholds Robin Hood until the last moment possible. Just when Kevin and the bandits are expecting the worst rogue yet, Robin emerges and proceeds to greet everyone as politely as a schoolteacher, taking the bandits' treasure by polite subterfuge. Kevin goes alone to Agamemnon's Greece, where the battle with the Minotaur is blazing, and after the snorting hybrid is dead and decapitated, Agamemnon offers no explanation for the beast, but instead carries its head back to the city and throws it into the street as a sign of victory. In the Time of Legends, there seem to be no precedents or rules whatsoever. An inept and befuddled ogre attempts to eat the time-travelers; they are carried off by a giant; and they reach the end of creation, the invisible barrier between the Time of Legend and the Fortress of Ultimate Darkness where Evil lives.

Along with Kevin's astonishment, wonder, and fear as his modern perspective is struck by the mismatch of the mythic material, there are also moments of recognition: his imagination has prepared him for interface with

the mythic, and, by the end of the film, he has entered the mythic realm himself and lives there but also in his "real" world simultaneously, not unlike the vision of the imaginative adventurer we see in *The Adventures of Baron Munchausen*. If "the characteristic feature of myth is the mediation of oppositions," then, Kevin can enter the mythic, even as he continues on in the "real" world, without one canceling out the other, again, just as Munchausen (Harpham 53). But also like the Baron, Kevin must, to some degree, kill his heroes in order to join them, as Ashbrook also notices (30). And this is the purpose of Kevin's experience of each epoch in history or legend—he is always to some degree disappointed. When the thrill wears off, he sees Napoleon as a violent, insecure nitwit; he is able to see Robin Hood hiding behind the brutality of his backwoods toughs, Agamemnon as a warrior-king with bourgeois marital problems, the ogre as more pathetic than frightening. Kevin discovers that ultimate Evil is silly, selfish, and petty, and that The Supreme Being is disingenuous, distant, and seems to know surprisingly little about his own creation.

Time Bandits also develops another of Gilliam's themes, barely hinted at in *Jabberwocky* in the appearance of the absurdly outfitted, one-man puppet show, and which *The Adventures of Baron Munchausen*, *The Brothers Grimm*, and *The Imaginarium of Doctor Parnassus* extend to a considerable degree: this is popular entertainment, often figured as some kind of stage or sideshow, as the last bastion of the mythic imagination, a theory also suggested by the likes of Samuel Johnson in his famous *Preface to Shakespeare* and by Bakhtin in *Rabelais and His World* and in *Speech Genres*

and Other Late Essays.4 In *Time Bandits*, the rogue angels, the band of

dwarves, themselves become the show, giving stage performances for

Napoleon and Agamemnon, and it is no accident that these performers serve

as Kevin's link to the reality of myth, at least until he is sufficiently prepared

to go his own way on a God-ordained mission back into his "real" world to

"fight evil." In *The Adventures of Baron Munchausen*, Henry Salt's players

perform rather poorly and ultimately require a good straightening out by the

baron himself, but they play on nonetheless, even while the city crumbles

down around them. Further, they are, after little Sally, among the first

believers in the baron's mythic significance, Henry even leading the people

against the Rite Ordinary Horatio Jackson's brutal common sense. In *The

Brothers Grimm*, the stage show consists of the Grimm's elaborately falsified

hauntings, aimed at extorting provincial communities by fabricating a

supernatural event that is meticulously integrated into local lore and then

charging them a fee to rid them of it. But the theme functions still, for it is

---

4 Johnson avers that Shakespeare's experiments in "mingled drama"—a
more ambiguous development of the tragicomedy in which the dramatist
pushes the comic and tragic together to such a degree that one is
indistinguishable from the other in certain plays (that is, grotesque), notably
King Lear—reach back to a primeval "chaos of mingled purposes and
causalities," a veritable pool of contradictions, which, by the time of the
Greeks and Romans, would be bifurcated into the poles of the comic and the
tragic. Bakhtin, focusing more closely on Shakespeare's language itself,
writes, in *Speech Genres and Other Late Essays*: "The semantic treasures
Shakespeare embedded in his works were created and collected through the
centuries and even millennia: they lay hidden in the language, and not only in
the literary language, but also in those strata of the popular language that
before Shakespeare's time had not entered literature . . . in plots whose roots
go back to prehistoric antiquity and . . . forms of thinking" (qtd. in Danow
144). This idea that popular entertainment functions as kind of a last bastion
of the mythic imagination (or, indeed, Bakhtin's "carnival spirit") is also one
of the central theses of *Rabelais and His World*.

Jacob who is responsible for tailoring the scare to the local myths with which he is fascinated, and it is also Jacob who has the imagination required to deal with the mythic when it breaks violently into the "real" world. Finally, in *The Imaginarium of Doctor Parnassus*, Parnassus' traveling sideshow is ever mistaken for a mere carnival attraction, seemingly torn from some circus in the distant past and starkly contrastive with its contemporary surroundings, as Roger Ebert observes in his review. But the ancient mystic does indeed deliver on his promise to facilitate new discovery and enlightenment within one's own imagination, and, even if he gambles on the souls of those who enter in, the imaginarium is not a mere playground for the mind. As he tells an inquiring police officer at one point, "What we do here is deadly serious."

Both *The Adventures of Baron Munchausen* and *The Brothers Grimm* rely on a setting in the late 18th century, "The Age of Reason," *Munchausen*'s title sequence reports, and then, for good measure it would seem, it adds, "Wednesday." Both films find their dramatic center in the rupture of mythic reality into a world that is circumscribed by the ideology of the "Age of Reason" and the brutal reaction of the "reasonable" French rulers to those whose imaginations conceive of worlds beyond what can be "analyzed, quantified, measured, rationalized," as the Munchausen character remarks in Gilliam's first draft of the script (qtd. in McCabe, *Dark Knights* 132). The films explore this theme from different angles. In *Munchausen*, the baron represents a fearless imaginary whose wild adventure story functions, again, through the device of a frame-narrative. But it manipulates the frame function in cleverly murky ways, ultimately disclosing that Munchausen has, merely by

telling his story, defeated the Sultan's army, a "real" threat in the "real" world, by fighting, and even dying, but by doing so on some mythic, "other" level of reality. In *The Brothers Grimm,* the threat comes at the Grimms from both directions: the "rational" French overseers and the mysterious world of myth, which here is a rather complicated meta-folktale that incorporates aspects of the tales of Little Red Riding Hood, Hansel and Gretel, Snow-White, Rapunzel, the Gingerbread Man, and I am sure others, and exploits the legends of the wolfman, the vampire, the golem, etc. In both films, the intrusion of the mythic into the "age of reason" is signified with fantastic grotesquery, while the threats and violence done in the name of reason are shockingly brutal and grimly real, ranging from the threat of the firing squad in *Munchausen* to *The Brothers Grimm*'s beheadings and elaborate torture devices.

The signifiers of the mythic in *The Brothers Grimm* include images of the enchanted forest coming to life: tree roots slithering about like snakes, then becoming tentacles that grab at unsuspecting passersby, or trees that creep around the forest, changing formation, taking on agency in their attempts to entrap the characters within their flanks. The film includes a number of transformations: the wolf into trapper, splattered mud into a golem, the golem (after ingesting a child) into an absurdly literal gingerbread man, and the Mirror Queen into shattered shards of glassy flesh. More images of bodily grotesquery are the living corpse—the Mirror Queen, who has won eternal life but not eternal youth (a theme Gilliam will play with again in *The Imaginarium of Doctor Parnassus*)—and the putty-faced child who attempts

to wipe mud from her face and inadvertently wipes her mouth and nose smooth.

The mythic mediates the oppositions and contradictions on which the grotesque thrives, and none of it fits within the bounds of the explainable in the reasonable terms offered as the dominant truth in the prevailing modern minds in the film. The film plays between genres of fantasy, horror, and suspense thriller, but, in the end, this seems to make it less recognizable as a Gilliam film. Gilliam's reliance on state-of-the-art computer generated graphics for much of its hallucinatory richness, as Ebert points out in his review, is impressive in its detail, but rings of the same kind of thing in Tim Burton's *Sleepy Hollow*, and so many other installments in the same visual vein.

Munchausen provides a much more textured and nuanced, wilder visual treat. [5] As Steven Rea points out in his article on the film for the *Philadelphia Inquirer*, Gilliam worked with Fellini collaborators, cinematographer Giuseppe Rotunno, production designer Dante Ferretti, and costume designer Gabriella Pescucci, and the film bears resemblance in color, texture, and style to films like *Juliet of the Spirits* and *Satyricon* (49). The

---

[5] As Gilliam admits in *Gilliam On Gilliam*, and Ashbrook points out as well, "One of Gilliam's stated aims . . . was to bring to life the dark and broody illustrations Gustave Dore provided for the book," most fully realized in the casting of John Neville as the baron, in the scene in which Death (with sickle and hourglass) hovers over the baron to take his soul, and shots of the "landscape of wrecked, skeletal galleons" in the belly of the sea beast (Ashbrook 55). Gilliam reports that in *Munchausen* his goal was to trap "the Age of Enlightenment between the baroque and the romantic," since the film is both baroquely "flamboyant and fabulously over the top" but also relies upon "nineteenth century stuff, such as the morbid romantic image of death" (Gilliam qtd. in Christie 176-177).

Turkish Sultan's harem, in particular, alludes to *Satyricon's* unruly, excessive

bodies: here, the variation of the human form is on display, filling the frame

with portly nudes who pace circles around a pool and recline in hammocks

above the action, as the Sultan's execution team, a turbaned dwarf with elfin

features and an enormous hatchet-man, whose eyes have been scorched shut

(a parody of blind justice perhaps), stand by and await their orders. After the

Baron and Sultan make their absurdly silly bet, a testament to the Baron's

unwillingness to be outdone by the Sultan and his weird world, the sultan

brings out his musical invention, the torture organ, a commingling of man

and machine composed of pipes and prods that enclose a number of prisoners

behind the bars of an elaborately designed pipe organ. He plays excerpts from

his opera, "The Torturer's Apprentice" to pass the hour that elapses while the

bet's winner is still unknown.[6] The Baron nearly loses the bet (and his head),

but his cartoonishly quick (a la the Roadrunner) servant rises to the occasion,

and the Baron wins the wager, which is, he claims, returning to the frame

narrative, what began the war with the Turks under which the French city

currently suffers. But to what end? What is the purpose of the sensual

splendor in a film that simply seems to leave it all behind?

An answer to this question provides an explanation for this problem,

but will no doubt create others; even so, it will give testament to Gilliam's

overall statement of the imagination. After he relates the story of his wager

with the Sultan, the Baron's narration is cut short as cannon fire rains down

---

[6] As Ashbrook points out, this scene bears some resemblances to the human doorbell of *Jabberwocky* and to the Python mouse organ, but also, perhaps, includes some vague parody of De Sade (55).

on the theater, and from this point forward, the distinction between the "real" world and the baron's mythic fantasy is blurred. And only within such a blur can the movie end as it does. The Turkish harem, in the world of the film, may or may not be embellished by the baron's imagination, but either way the grotesquely fleshy sensuality of the place is only one episode in Munchausen's systematic experience of the physical and the metaphysical: he experiences the poles of violent rage (Vulcan) and serene beauty (Venus) available in the mythological world; he travels in a pink balloon made of ladies underskirts to the moon (an obvious reference to Meleis's *A Trip to the Moon*) to visit its king, the comically Cartesian Ray/Roger[7], and queen, with whom Munchausen had an affair on a previous journey; he is swallowed by a leviathan in the depths of the sea; and he even experiences death (contra Wittgenstein), as the hooded, skeletal ghoul extracts the baron's soul through his mouth.

Munchausen, not unlike the works of Rabelais, is about the breadth, depth, and scale of the experience of the world, and the central role

---

[7] The Moon King is so Cartesian that his head and his body retain separate names, Ray and Roger, respectively. Gilliam throws in as many jokes aimed at Descartes as possible. The floating, moon-head king despises his body: "I haven't got time for flatulence and orgasms." The cogito of the king is predictably arrogant about his intellectual pursuits, at one point explaining to the Baron: "I, that is, the head, where the brilliant and important parts are located, is now ruling the known universe. And that which I don't know, I create: Cogito ergo es: I think, therefore, you is!" This episode provides another layer of *Munchausen's* critique of the "age of reason," here, via a novel inversion of Bakhtinian "degradation": instead of "the lowering of all that is high, spiritual, ideal, and abstract," which the moon sequence does, of course, on one level, Gilliam elevates the grizzled, aged, mad, Munchausen, and next to the too Cartesian Moon King, the baron seems quite sane and able-bodied (Bakhtin, *Rabelais* 19).

imagination plays in experiencing as widely and wildly as possible. The baron's adventures are, for him, based in his experience—a catchword for Gilliam's "Age of Reason"—but the possibilities of experience seem nearly limitless under the liberating tutelage of the mythic imagination. Further, Munchausen is never surprised, never shocked with wonder, at any of his experiences. He does not become "lost" in fantasy, as little Sally Salt seems to think at certain points in the film: he becomes carried away in the depth of his experience of the worlds of fantasy-reality, but he is on a parallel with this world. He is as much a part of the pantheon of mythic existence as the Moon King, Vulcan, or Venus, and these characters seem to acknowledge this fact as well. The "real" world of the late 18th century, though, has lost the imagination to conceive of leviathans, moon kings, gods and goddesses, or of anything that exists beyond the logical, and it has lost the mythic thinking required to make any sense out of Baron Munchausen, as his exchange with the Rite Ordinary Horatio Jackson depicts: Jackson: "We cannot fly to the moon, we cannot defy death. We must face the facts, not the folly of fantasists like you, who do not live in the real world." Baron: "Your reality, sir, is lies and balderdash, and I am delighted to say that I have no grasp of it whatsoever." Gilliam relates the baron's adventures through images and sequences that are grotesque because they work according to the rules of myth rather than the logic of modernity. These images of excessive bodies, human and otherwise, divided, enormous, tiny, but all very much alive—too alive in some cases[8]—and of contradictions

---

[8] By "too alive," I am referring to the excessive powers of the Munchausen's servants: the dwarf whose lung capacity is inestimable, the

of physical and metaphysical space and time are out of place in the modern reality of the "Age of Reason." Not only does Gilliam rely on the mythic in these films in order to impinge its grotesque otherness on the viewers, but he also seems to do so as a critique of the "modern mind" and its loss of vision and lack of imagination, its failure to experience the limitless worlds that a Baron Munchausen can live in. Such imaginativeness, in *Munchausen*, reignites the popular imagination, delivers the people from their fears, and threatens and overcomes official power and order.

But the mythic imagination is not only a place of liberation, of realizable fantasy, and impossible experience too often sidelined, forgotten, or defused by "modern" thinking; it is also revealed to be a dangerous place in Gilliam's films. *The Imaginarium of Doctor Parnassus* provides a meditation that extends in both directions. In *Parnassus*, the modern mind is short-circuited: few in the film's version of contemporary London have an imagination of proportions vast enough to dream with the mythic mind, but when they step through his mirror, Parnassus facilitates by magnifying to mythic scale and rendering in mythic terms the content of their own pathetic imaginations. Gilliam depicts these inward journeys, and the content is rarely surprising, but the scale and quality is, as Mark Jenkins puts it in his review, a "crystalline fantasy."

Parnassus, who takes his name from one of the "Muses' mountains," the highest peak of which also serves the function of providing the means for

---

impossibly strong giant, and the marksman whose eyes can see for hundreds of miles unaided.

the salvation of mankind in the myth of Zeus's Deluge, is like Baron

Munchausen in that he represents a mythic presence in a world that seems to

have no place for such anomalies (Hamilton 40, 93-94). Also, as is the case in

Time Bandits and *The Adventures of Baron Munchausen*, the world of the

imagination in *Parnassus* has overlaps with the "real" world: what happens to

people in the realm of imagination, whether bliss or death, has "real"

consequences in the "real" world. Likewise, both Parnassus and his dark,

slithery counterpart, Mr. Nick, each with his own vices, powers, and

attractions in both dimensions, occupy the "real" world as much as they stand

for opposite poles of good and evil in the realm of the imagination.

In Mr. Nick, Gilliam again redefines evil. In *Time Bandits*, embodied

evil is locked away in a gothic fortress outside of light, time, and creation. His

master plan is to learn and exploit human technology, which his finale in the

film shows him quite capable of, as he easily manipulates the machines of

destruction that Kevin and the bandits have brought from the distant corners

of time to use against him, even revealing himself capable of grotesque

mechanical transformation. Human apathy and laziness—human attraction to

technology—are painted as vestiges of evil. This notion carries over in some

ways to *Brazil*. Technology in this film, though, is imaged most prominently

in the form of ducts, in elaborately crafted information

(gathering/disseminating) devices, and in the ever-present televisions, all of

which are signifiers of the reach and influence of the state and of the popular

desire for an easy and thoughtless existence. The state reaches out through

technology with the promise of making life comfortable, more organized, and

predictable by incorporating every part of society in its centralizing processes.

But it fails frequently, and these failures are embarrassing for the state and

require explanation and exculpation, and this becomes central to the narrative

of the film (Christie 144). So, evil is technology here, but it is also politely

bureaucratic totalitarian politics and its brutal underside. In *Munchausen* and

The Brothers Grimm, images of evil come, again, from the ruling ideology,

figured in government officials, and, also like *Brazil*, in the brutality with

which they wish to maintain the status quo. *The Brothers Grimm* involves a

threat of evil from the mythical past as well, but it too is involved with the

selfish wishes of a tyrant from a former age, one whose world and ideology

have disappeared but whose powers have not. *Fear and Loathing in Las*

Vegas figures a brand of evil as banal in the pathetically trivial excesses the

American imagination offers in Las Vegas, the experience of which Duke and

Gonzo supplement with drugs, as well as in the complete inhibition of even

the especially dark reaches of the imagination.

Parnassus extends Gilliam's conception of evil to a strange marriage of

some objective (or at least intersubjective) and subjective realities. Mr. Nick is

an objective embodiment of evil, as "real" in the "real" world as Parnassus

himself. But his appeals to people are through temptations of vice, selfishness,

fear, security, laziness: he offers a drink to a drunk, a sexual escapade to an

uptight bourgeois lady, the security of their old-world Russian mother to

some mobsters. It is interesting that within the world of the imaginarium, the

polarity does not consist of the Devil and God, but Mr. Nick, a personalization

of the Devil, and Parnassus himself. Parnassus represents salvation, and

within the imaginarium his most frequent appearance is as a darkened mountain; just as in the Greek myth, Parnassus as mountain represents the realm of inspiration, imagination, and liberation. But one must choose between evil and imagination, between easy answers and cheap dreams and the mythic "story without which the universe would cease to exist," but he or she makes this decision from within the world of imagination. When people enter into the mirror, Parnassus facilitates the modern-minded by providing them with enough imagination to occasion the choice. Otherwise, it seems, they are Mr. Nick's as a foregone conclusion, since most in the street scenes in London have only enough of a mind to see the troupe as a mad gang of sideshow freaks, a Ship of Fools, if they notice them at all.

V

Gilliam's films provide deeper insight for the notion of madness as well. In all of the films I have been discussing, the characters associated with the mythic imagination are alienated in their social milieu, and most of them (Munchausen, Jacob Grimm, and Parnassus) are accused of madness. The worlds of these films, though, validate such "madness," proving that these characters are attuned to a world that the rest do not have the eyes to see, that is, until the worlds collide, and the modern-minded are struck with the mysteriously inexplicable or they are thrown headlong into an unpredictable fantasyland that is, perhaps, illogical and unanalyzable but unmistakably real. But there is another variation of madness that Gilliam's films are preoccupied

with. There is a scene in *Jabberwocky* that prefigures this. A troupe of mad, zealous flagellants (quite obviously borrowed from Bergman's *The Seventh Seal*), who haunt the streets of the city and preach of the apocalypse the Jabberwocky represents, perform oddly violent acts of asceticism, evidencing both their madness and their piety. At one point, well into the film, they find Dennis and decide to offer him up as a sacrifice to appease the bloodlust of the beast and as a sign of their measureless faithfulness. Their leader waxes on and on about the terrible ordeal Dennis will undergo as his bones are cracked and he is incinerated by the Jabberwocky. One of the mad ones, obviously deeply affected by this description, takes Dennis' place and willingly undergoes the ritual sacrifice. Madness in this scene is depicted not only in the wild behavior of the mad, but also in its peculiar relationship to the unruly imagination, one way in which this scene prefigures the madnesses of characters in *Brazil*, *The Fisher King*, *Twelve Monkeys*, *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas*, and *Tideland*. Further, most of these films resonate with this scene's depiction of the relationship that subsists among suffering (often self-imposed or voluntary), escape, and madness (though in various ways) and between madness and the mythic.

In *Madness and Civilization: A History of Insanity in the Age of Reason*, Michel Foucault discusses the shifts in the cultural "experience of madness" in the West from the Middle Ages and Renaissance to "our own experience, which confines insanity within mental illness" (xii). He summarizes his thesis in this excerpt from the preface:

> In the Middle Ages and Renaissance, man's dispute with
> madness was a dramatic debate in which he confronted the
> secret powers of the world; the experience of madness was
> clouded by images of the Fall and the Will of God, of the Beast
> and the Metamorphosis, and of all the marvelous secrets of
> Knowledge. In our era, the experience of madness remains
> silent in the composure of a knowledge which, knowing too
> much about madness, forgets it. (xii)

Foucault's claim is that before the "classical experience of madness is born,"
as modernity takes a firm hold of western culture around the arrival of the
seventeenth century, madness is invested with a troubling significance—"at
the limits of the world, of man and death—an eschatological figure" (37, 35).
Medieval madness accesses "a forbidden wisdom" of the Fall and of the
"Apocalyptic dreams" of the age (22-23). As time moves on, madness moves
from the "world and its subterranean threats" into man himself and becomes
linked to "his weaknesses, dreams, and illusions," and in this "delusive
attachment to himself, man generates his madness like a mirage," projecting
it on the mad as a mirror of the unsettling aspects of his own humanity (26-
27). Foucault discusses the "madman's liminal position on the horizon of
medieval concern": confined within the city gates or upon the ships of fools,
"external to everything," yet trapped within a means of exclusion that also
encloses him, inside and outside at once, "a sort of ritual division," a

sacramental absence (10-11).⁹ In medieval and early Renaissance conception,
Foucault writes, "The madman's voyage is at once a rigorous division and an
absolute passage. In one sense, it simply develops across a half-real, half-
imaginary geography" (11). Each embarkation upon the waters of murky
ambiguity "is, potentially, the last. It is for the other world that the madman
sets sail in his fools' boat; it is from the other world that he comes when he
disembarks" (11).

It is this freighted mysteriousness at the fringes of conscious reality
that disappears from the modern, scientific experience of madness. By the
time Shakespeare and Cervantes are working their ironic turns on tragic
madness, the affliction itself is shifting its colors: Madness is becoming what
Foucault calls "Unreason" within the "monologue of reason" (31-32, xi). In the
"Age of Reason," madness signifies only reason's "other"; it occupies a
"silence"; it has lost its rich, symbolic ambiguity (xi). Madness moves from
borderlands of the taboo and the terrible in the liminal spaces in the medieval
and Renaissance mind and culture to the specifically delineated, concrete
places of the "Madhouse" and the "Hospital of Madmen" by the seventeenth

---

⁹ In this notion of sacramental absence or "ritual exclusion," Foucault
refers to the social and ecclesiastical structures that were created to deal with
the threat of lepers in the Middle Ages: "Hieratic witnesses of evil, they
accomplish their salvation in and by their very exclusion: in a strange
reversibility that is the opposite of good works and prayer, they are saved by
the hand that is not stretched out. . . . Abandonment is his salvation; his
exclusion offers him another form of communion" (7). "Leprosy disappeared,
the leper vanished, or almost, from memory; these structures remained" (7).
But the same "formulas of exclusion would be repeated" two or three
centuries later in the same places, except in these instances with the mad, who
would "take the part played by the leper," though with a new meaning and "in
a very different culture" (7).

century, and this orderly confinement serves to protect the latter from the "great tragic threats" madness represented in the earlier epoch: "madness" in the Age of Reason is the domain of the "disturbed" rather than the "disturbing" (35-37). Such a modern experience of madness as sheer "Unreason," then, divests it of its primitive, mythic otherworldliness. Foucault discovers madness as epistemological contradictions, knowing by not knowing or the "wisdom of fools" (22); as moral significance, the darkened mirror of the common man's pride and presumption (27); and as ontological opposition to the status quo, that is, the association with the mad grin of death in/on the face of the living (15-16) and the "ritual division" madness necessitates in church polity (10). Such variety in madness in the middle ages and Renaissance, Foucault suggests, represents a notably mythic approach to the experience of madness, which, as Foucault demonstrates, is very much alive in the "long dynasty of images" collected in the works of Bosch and Brueghel, among others (15).

The loss of such consciousness, all but complete by the seventeenth century, and its displacement by "reason" not only mutes the mad within the monologue of medical science, but also robs the art of the past age of the mythical coherence represented in its images of threat and violence (35). This situation, this shift from mythic to modern thinking, renders the paintings artifacts, bastard accidents of a primitive age. And if Harpham is right, and "the grotesque consists of the manifest, visible, or unmediated presence of mythic or primitive elements in a nonmythic or modern context," then the modern experience of such works is likely an occasion in which the grotesque

factors quite prominently. The other side of the coin is that, if Foucault's theory holds, images of madness reinvested with its mythic significance, images such as Gilliam's, also offer potentially grotesque, modern experiences of madness. Gilliam is interested in madness on both sides of Foucault's divide, and, not only this, but some of his films (*Brazil* to some degree, but more particularly *The Fisher King* and *Twelve Monkeys*) even seem to center in on the tensions between the two sides of Foucault's archeology as married counterparts that lend drama to his renditions of the mad in the movies. Others, like *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas* and *Tideland*, play one form of madness against another: the madness of innocents against the imposition of the madness of a threatening world.

Gilliam signals madness in his films in at least two ways. The first is by the sympathetic organization of much of the narrative and perspective of a given film from within the subjective experience of its mad characters. This aspect of his style of filmmaking can have rather disconcerting, disorienting effects because, as is the case in *Brazil, The Fisher King, Twelve Monkeys, Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas,* and *Tideland*, the films' subjective perspective invites spectators to share in the delusions, hallucinations, and inner dialogue of mad characters, all while withholding a foothold of objectivity from a "real" world perspective for some time. Gilliam relates internal experiences of madness, often without them necessarily seeming mad, precisely by exploiting this exploded sense of ambiguity about what is objective and what is subjective, what is "real" and what is not.

Brazil and *Twelve Monkeys* implicitly rely on this ambiguity. Both films feature protagonists whose dreams viewers see with relative frequency, and these dreams are cued as dream sequences by the character waking up afterwards, by repeated images that are coded in the narrative as related to the dream world (such as Sam's winged warrior alter-ego in *Brazil* and Cole's dream-memory of the airport scene in *Twelve Monkeys*), and by manipulated sound and motion (the slowed motion and sound in *Twelve Monkey's* airport scene as well as in Sam's dreams of Jill in *Brazil*). But both films, after establishing the codes and cues for dream sequences, provide information that demands reinterpretation of earlier moments in the films. As Matthew Conley observes of *Brazil* in his thesis on Gilliam, when Sam "drifts off into his last fantasy without any of the clues which previously informed the viewer that Sam's real world experience ends and his fantasy one begins," the film moves into its penultimate twenty minutes, which provide climactic action and a happy ending (35). All of this is then undercut by a pull away from Sam's perspective to reveal that he has indeed gone mad, and, while this is a definite end to our view of his fantasy, as Katrina Boyd claims, in "Pastiche and Postmodernism in *Brazil*," "the disorientation arises from the impossibility of determining when the dream began" because all of the cues have vanished (40). Sam's dream world has been overtaken by the signifiers of the "real" world.

In *Twelve Monkeys* the generic conventions of the film's beginnings disclose that it would be well placed as a science fiction film, but when Cole is revealed to be schizophrenic, spectators are offered a rational explanation for

the science fiction aspects of Cole's experiences in the future: that they are sequences in which Gilliam is showing viewers the contents of Cole's delusional reality. But, as Gilliam reminds us in an interview for *Gilliam On Gilliam*, the film offers subjective points of view from both the position of science/psychiatry and from a position of subject/madness and allows the ambiguity that arises in their conflicting explanations to hang over most of the film (230). When information from both time settings begins to line up for Dr. Railly (a character who serves to mediate the reason and madness of *Twelve Monkeys* by verifying Cole's seemingly paranoid claims about the future, while also sharing in parts of his madness), viewers must again reinterpret the sequences in the future as "real." But aspects of the future Cole experiences become more and more absurd as the film continues, which may be because of Cole's subjective experience of madness, since excessive time travel, we are told from early on in the movie, is associated with driving people mad. As one level of narrative ambiguity related to an attribution of madness associated with the past setting lifts, then, and as Cole's predictions are confirmed, a new charge of insanity from the future setting is leveled against the protagonist, and the film ends without completely settling these out.

The second way in which Gilliam signals madness in his films is through the ways in which his actors physically manifest attributes associated with the madness of their characters. In most of Gilliam's films, exaggerated or excessive physical movement, often used for comic purposes, are rather prominent features of the director's style, as Dennis in *Jabberwocky*; the dwarves and Robin Hood's thieves in *Time Bandits*; and Berthold, Vulcan,

and King Ray/Roger (among others) in *The Adventures of Baron Munchausen* all demonstrate. But with his mad characters in *The Fisher King, Twelve Monkeys,* and *Tideland*, the excesses of physical movement, along with exaggerated speech patterns and general bodily anomaly, become part of the repertories of characterizing the mad. Parry, along with many of the supporting characters that people the two mad worlds in which he figures, that of the homeless and that of the institutionalized; Jeffrey in *Twelve Monkeys* and the institutionalized insane in that film; and Dickens in *Tideland*—all fill their time on screen with wild gesticulation, frequently featured tics, and rocking, evidencing not only a preponderance of nervous/internal energy seeking physical/external outlet, but also their alienation from the characters who do not share their affliction, whose behavior is normally rather subdued. Along the same lines, these characters exhibit speech patterns that usually consist of loud, fast-paced, rambling rants and bodily anomalies, such as the Gay Bum's skeletal figure and Sid's leglessness in *The Fisher King*; Jeffrey's lazy eye and, as Ashbrook observes, Cole's conspicuous amount of "leaking" (drooling, crying, bleeding, sweating) in *Twelve Monkeys*; and Dickens's prominent gum-line, cranial scars, and contortedness in *Tideland* (Ashbrook 74).

Wardrobe for Gilliam's mad ones reinforces their physical oddity: Parry as a homeless man is outfitted in exceptionally dirty clothes, along with some Quixotic accommodations for battling knights and as an institutionalized catatonic in weirdly colorful pajamas; *Twelve Monkeys* features the mental patients in bathrobes and hospital gowns, Cole in a see-

through plastic raincoat (and nothing else), and Jeffrey in a tuxedo at one point; *Tideland* displays Dickens in a dress, blonde wig, and poorly applied, clownish makeup. Gilliam seems to allow those characters who may be on the fringe of madness to exhibit similar excesses in order to refer to their relationship with madness at given points in the narrative, even if it is only a flirtation that they are not wholly consumed by, as seen with Jack donning Parry's clothes and demeanor in *The Fisher King* and in Dr Railly's increasingly physical fits of hysterics in *Twelve Monkeys*. Beyond merely signaling the mad as "other" with these markedly visceral, visual, and auditory strategies for the purpose of establishing dynamics between characters, Gilliam also strips them of the baggage of modern normality as the movies present it in order for them to fulfill a purpose more akin to the mythic function of the mad that Foucault refers to.

Brazil, The Fisher King, and *Twelve Monkeys* figure madness as mythic on at least two levels: the mythic formal structure and content of characters' madness and the mythic functions of madness within the worlds of the films (in terms close to Foucault's description of the symbolically freighted cultural function of madness in the medieval and Renaissance eras). On the first level, each of the films' presentations of the delusions, dreams, fantasies, etc. associated with the madness of characters involves some reference to mythic thinking via a mythic formal structure, one that seeks to mediate contradictions in an overarching narrative (usually an all encompassing dualism) that thrives on their opposition and attaches meaning to almost everything (Harpham 53-54). Gilliam's penchant for archetypes and

mythology, which he openly admits to in a number of interviews, is unleashed in intertwined myth references in each of the films: Sam in *Brazil* images himself in his dreams as an Icarus figure that fights monsters to protect an idealized woman; Parry quests for the grail in *The Fisher King*; Cole attempts to save the world from certain destruction in *Twelve Monkeys*.[10] In all of the films, the mad characters' delusions depend on a good/evil dualism from within which they, on the side of good, must fight evil for the sake of some innocent other(s). As the mad/mythic narrative plays out, especially in *The Fisher King* and *Twelve Monkeys*, characters ascribe significance to objects that, outside the narrative of their delusions or fantasies, would be meaningless. Parry totemizes various objects to use as weapons and for defensive measures; his grail quest is centered on a wealthy stranger's trophy that he saw in the background of a photograph in a magazine. Cole is obsessed with collecting information, which leads him to eat a spider and interpret radio commercials as special messages for him, and when he becomes convinced the scientists from the future are tracking him, he performs an effective but gory tooth extraction with a pocket knife over a wounded pimp in a bathtub. *Twelve Monkeys* also features Jeffrey's paranoid rant about credit cards, consumerism, animal rights, and madness, in which heightened meaning is attached to any corner of human behavior and can be integrated into his systematic, paranoid critique of everything. In these films, Gilliam's

---

[10] For Gilliam on archetypes and mythology, see the chapter on *Jabberwocky* in McCabe's *Dark Knights and Holy Fools*; chapters 4 and 8 in *Gilliam On Gilliam*; and his interview with Jerdi Costa and Sergi Sanchez, "Childhood, Vocation, and First Experiences of a Rebel Dreamer."

use of mythic narrative as paranoid delusion of the mad, then, reaffirms Harpham's and Foucault's observations about the alienatedness of mythic patterns of thinking in the modern world as well as about loss of a meaningful context for the narratives of the mad to function.

On the second level, Gilliam's films center on the tensions between the modern experience of madness as stripped of any significance beyond the need to get well through treatment in confinement and the rich meaning attributed to the mad in the medieval and Renaissance experience of madness, which, though it depended on their "ritual division" from society, culturally invested the affliction with a "dynasty of images" associated with the terrible, the tempting, and the unknowns of human existence (Foucault 10,15). *Brazil* highlights madness as an escape from the suffocating confinement of modernity. Sam's mythic daydreams and nightmares are as impossible to realize as it would be for him to escape from the Kafkaesque world in which he lives, and when he attempts to bring them both to fruition, he fails pathetically and falls so deeply into his delusions that he cannot be retrieved. The film establishes a relationship between the ideologies of social control and madness as escape, but focuses more attention on characterizing the state and dramatizing the tensions between its hegemonic methods of incorporating subjects through civil and political measures in order to control them and the bald threat of violence as a tool of social control.[11]

---

[11] A Gramscian/Althusserian interpretation of *Brazil* would be an interesting and fruitful direction, but it would not necessarily be an appropriate move to make in this essay. Indeed, a thesis built around Gramsci's term "hegemony" from *The Prison Notebooks* and Althusser's

The Fisher King and Twelve Monkeys rely in a more centralized way on the plight of the mad in a modern context, and both films ride Foucault's dividing line between locating them alternatively in society's liminal spaces or in confinement in its institutions under medical care for their afflictions. Though the mad as homeless in both films reveals something more along the lines of the former model (of the ship of fools and the confinement within the gates of the city) in which they are free to wander but kept away (exclusion through a type of liberation), as patients, these characters waste away in institutions, which Gilliam depicts as dilapidated structures in which the insane take pills, watch television, and drive each other crazier. The implied *general* social function of the mad in these modern contexts, in either locale, is evacuated of meaning, with the possible exception of the scapegoat role the homeless play in *The Fisher King*, though this seems to be aimed more directly at their homelessness than their madness. The *specific* function the mad play within this more general silence, though—Gilliam's function for them—is closely related to their mythic significance to the middle ages and Renaissance. In *The Fisher King*, Parry's symbolic significance to Jack is precisely related to Jack's own guilt about the effects of his pride and selfishness: Parry becomes an embodiment of these things. Jack attempts to alleviate his guilt through his attempts to alleviate Parry's suffering, but when this fails, Jack, in a sense, joins in Parry's madness by carrying out the latter's

development of it, especially in the first fifty pages of *On Ideology*, may have already been constructed somewhere. Such a position with *Brazil* would almost seem to write itself. See Gramsci's *Selections from the Prison Notebooks*, "State and Civil Society" (206-76) and Althusser's *On Ideology* (especially pages 1-51).

grail quest as a last-ditch attempt at a selfless act. And when all of the reason and science modern psychiatry have to offer fail Parry, Jack's victorious act within the ludicrous world of the mad/mythic narrative of Parry's delusions delivers Parry from his catatonia and from much of the debilitation of his madness. So, it is from within a context in which madness is freighted with man's projections of his own weaknesses that he is able to overcome those weaknesses, and help the madman overcome his as well.

Gilliam uses madness in *Twelve Monkeys* as representative of the secret knowledge of the world, and here the secret or forbidden knowledge involves many of the themes that Foucault claims find associations with madness in the medieval and Renaissance era, including the Fall, fate or determinism (Foucault's "the Will of God"), and of any number of apocalyptic themes and images (Foucault xii). Again, to repeat the formulation of the last paragraph, the *general* function of madness that is implied in this film, too, is classically modern—the homeless/institutionalized insane occupy a silence, and they fill the geographical places that others rarely or never go. But, Gilliam's *specific* function for madness within the general ignorance and avoidance of the mad is implicitly connected to the apocalyptic and epistemological themes Foucault discusses as prominent in the medieval and Renaissance experience of madness. And even while these aspects of Cole's delusions are taken by the representatives of psychiatry as evidence of Cole's madness, eventually his apocalyptic predictions are validated—his "secret knowledge" actually *is* knowledge rather than delusion, lending some credence to Cole's discussion in the film of the human tendency to overextend

their rightful bounds in pursuit of scientific knowledge, for, after all, the Beast

in *Twelve Monkeys* turns out to be a mad scientist.

　　Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas and *Tideland* demonstrate Gilliam

using the madness, or perhaps the flirtation with madness, of the protagonists

with similar functions in opposing contexts. Both films depict their

protagonists as different kinds of innocents, innocents who are driven

towards madness in response to a certain madness they experience in the

world. In *Fear and Loathing*, the madness of the world is represented in Las

Vegas, and the city represents the farthest reaches of what is possible to

experience or of what is imaginable in American culture. The film makes for

little guesswork as to its political theme: Duke's voice-over narration refers to

the purpose of the trip to Las Vegas as a thoroughgoing exploration of the

freedoms available in this country, a true American experience for those with

enough grit to withstand it. Further, to reinforce this theme, the film features

images of American flags almost everywhere, start to finish. And, as the film

progresses through Las Vegas' bars, circuses, and casinos, Duke's

commentary is usually pointed at how pathetic it all is, even on drugs. By the

final episodes of the film, Duke and Gonzo have given up on Vegas and have

turned the corner on their road to excess and experience back towards

themselves, leaving them locked within hotel rooms traversing the crooked

paths of the excesses of their own psyches with the help of their well-stocked

drug case. Interestingly, the largest image of an American flag comes onto the

screen after Duke awakens some days after his dose of adrenachrome; the

enormous flag has been painted across almost an entire wall in what looks like

garbage, feces, food, and paint, as if the two themes of the true "American experience" and the search for excesses far exceeding those the country can offer have finally converged.[12]

Gilliam claims to have conceived of the adaptation of Hunter S. Thompson's book of the same name as "like Dante's *Inferno*, with Gonzo as a kind of Virgil, a pagan, primal thing that is out of control half the time. Then you have Duke/Dante watching and being guided" (qtd. in McCabe, "Chemical" 137). And it is the tension between Duke's role as observer/recorder/commentator and his role as Gonzo's protégé that serves to establish a certain prophetic stance in his madness. All of the ridiculousness of the romp around the city is juxtaposed with frequent narration from Duke that, with an almost philosophical detachment, analyzes the meaning and development of the drug culture, the falsity of the American dream, the political failures of the 1960's, and so on. The disparity between the two is reminiscent of madman as the wise fool, who unknowingly speaks "love to lovers, the truth of life to the young, the middling reality of things to the proud and insolent, and to liars," but some of the hallucinatory visions Duke experiences reveal his connection to knowledge of another kind, the knowledge of the poles of metaphysical existence and human experience:

---

[12] These "wake-up" scenes, which occur a few times in the film, are obvious sites of grotesquery, though perhaps not along the lines of the mythic/madness that I am arguing in this chapter, or perhaps tangentially so. These scenes and many of those featuring Gonzo are nearly suffused with evidence of Gilliam's interest in the lower bodily stratum, scatology, and the grotesque body (mostly Gonzo's). The film also contains Gilliam's signature of cartoonishly physical characterization: Duke creeps about exaggeratedly, and his movements become more extreme the more drugs he takes.

"Satan and the end of the world; ultimate bliss and supreme punishment; omnipotence on earth and the infernal fall" (Foucault 14, 22).

Tideland's protagonist, the nine-year-old Jeliza-Rose, is nearly driven to madness by the grisly experiences she undergoes when she is isolated in the open spaces and picturesque country prairies of her father's childhood home. But Gilliam rides a fine line in the film between identifying Jeliza-Rose with imaginative naiveté and childish playfulness and with the threat of full fledged madness in response to her increasingly unsettling experiences. When her father dies unexpectedly the first night after their arrival to the house, she is unable to process it and continues, day after day, to attempt to rouse him; then, becoming bored and repelled by the early stages of his decomposition, she puts a wig on him, make-up, perfume, and sunglasses. Jeliza-Rose meets and befriends a mentally disabled man, Dickens, and the two have a number of intimately affectionate kissing scenes. Dickens's sister, Dell, an amateur taxidermist and former flame of the corpse/father, Noah, also enters into a tenuous friendship with Jeliza-Rose for a time. The young girl observes as Dell expels the gas from her dead father's bowls, pumps his fluids out, and cuts into his flesh. She wakes up hours later and gives her newly preserved father two doll heads, popping them into his hollow belly to take with him to his "next life," before Dell stitches him closed. His leathery corpse heads the table at Sunday dinner and cuddles the young girl at night.

Gilliam is unrelenting as to how far into the disturbingly grotesque he will go in *Tideland*, but he remarks in an interview with Paul Fischer that it is "one of the most sweet, tender films I've ever made." Gilliam reports in

another interview, with Phil Stubbs, that his wife described the film as being "shocking because it was innocent." The tenderness and innocence in the film is tied to the half-mad, imaginative, and playful point of view of the little girl. *Tideland* is firmly situated within her perspective, and almost none of the horrifying images come into the film in a horrifying context; she takes them as they come, one after the other, sending her deeper and deeper within this isolated world that gets weirder and weirder by the day. But Jeliza-Rose, since she is a nine-year-old girl with an already troubled past, a dark sense of playfulness, and two dead parents, has no context for the weird—she treats everything as of equal importance, and this is how Gilliam gives viewers her experiences in the film. The score is unobtrusive; most of the horrifying aspects of the film occur in full daylight against a beautiful landscape; he relies on mostly wide lenses and resists manipulating viewers' attention in the shots by drawing it towards the most horrifying aspect in the frame. When she comes to the brink of madness, the film depicts these moments as exaggerated play within the imaginary world the little girl has created for herself: the doll heads she plays with and speaks for begin talking in voices she can hear—still in the voices that she had used for them earlier—but now they do so without her actually speaking for them; she is losing control, splintering. But she is resilient, and Jeliza-Rose is delivered from her mad-haunted voyage across the vast, grassy nowhere-lands through an apocalyptic train crash, "the end of the world," as Dickens prophesizes it when he shows Jeliza-Rose his stolen sticks of dynamite.

Tideland depicts Jeliza-Rose's navigation of her own madness "across a half real, half imaginary geography" that is peopled with mad ones whose return to sanity seems impossible; mad ones who create real worlds out of dead things/people to avoid the pain of losing them (Foucault 11). Their imaginations have figuratively and literally carried them away; they are isolated in the weird worlds of their own invention. And Jeliza-Rose's journey into those worlds seems to have granted a new knowledge, perhaps a forbidden one, as the closing scene seems to suggest, as the young girl bites into an apple, while apocalyptic fire blazes and the wounded lurch about all around her, and the glimmer of the blaze and its reflection in her eyes coalesce as that shimmering separates and flutters away as fireflies born of the incandescence of the moment.

VI

My interpretation of the film-worlds of Terry Gilliam has focused on elements of the mythic and the role it plays in Foucault's construction of madness (before and after the dawn and reign of "reason" in the Western mind), and the ways in which both the mythic and madness contribute to interpreting the grotesquery in Gilliam's films. As I pointed out earlier, the dynamics of these functions in Gilliam's films, as in Harpham's discussion, relies on a distinction between any number of related dualisms, many of which lead back to the relationship between "mythic," "primitive," "archetypal" thinking and patterns of thought that are conceived of as

"nonmythic," "modern," "rational," etc. And the concept of thinking, in whatever guise, when Gilliam is concerned, must lead back to imagination, which for philosopher Markus Gabriel, implies the notion of reflection, the act of thinking.

In Gabriel's chapter on Schelling's theory of mythology in his and Žižek's book, *Mythology, Madness, and Laughter: Subjectivity in German Idealism*, he writes:

> In our age of the world-picture, the mythological conditioning of our experience hides itself behind *the mythology of de-mythologization. . . .* This story is one of the cornerstones of our mythology that believes in scientific, manipulatory rationality's capacity to transcend historicity. It does blind itself to the possibility that the very era of the world as picture ready to be manipulated might itself be a world-picture, namely the world-picture of the world-picture. As Schelling, Heidegger, and Wittgenstein agree, reflection is inevitably bound to a set of finite, discursive expressions of itself generating imaginary frameworks, mythologies. *Those frameworks are usually not reflected and cannot be fully reflected: any attempt to achieve such a totalizing reflection simply generates another myth, a different imaginary.* (18-19, ital. orig.)

If Gabriel (along with Schelling et al) is right, then, all of the dualisms, the competing worldviews, etc. must find their center in reflection, in imagination, which provides the only real context we have for thinking.

Further, if mythologies reveal the forms of thinking, which is itself necessarily imaginative, then what Harpham's theory is missing is a treatment of the disjuncture between mythic thinking and its modern counterpart as rival mythologies. For if reason is as much a construction of mythic thinking as any of the primitive narratives, just one that has made its own superiority part of its mythology, then the rivalry between mythologies for dominance in a culture must be markedly political because ideology (a form of mythmaking itself) plays a distinct role in what mythology will lead a culture's patterns of thought. In the context of the grotesque in Gilliam's films, then, such a conception of myth suggests that the relationship between the themes I have been concerned with here and the more political themes present in the films, and perhaps most prominently in *Brazil*, is a close one. Thus, my study of the mythic, madness, and the grotesque would benefit from a parallel study concerned with interpretations of Gilliam's political themes.

CHAPTER V

THE CROSSROADS IN COEN COUNTY: THE MUNDANE AND THE

CATASTROPHIC IN THE FILMS OF JOEL AND ETHAN COEN

"A man, being what he is, finds out *who* he is in moments of extremis: when

he's got to jump left, jump right—when he can't stay where he's at."

—Harry Crews in *Searching for the Wrong-Eyed Jesus*

"[T]he Absurd is not in man . . . nor in the world, but in their presence

together. For the moment it is the only bond uniting them."

—Albert Camus, "An Absurd Reasoning"

I

The films of Joel and Ethan Coen, if one could reach, perhaps, in what

seems, initially, a critically unhelpful manner, for an overarching motif, a kind

of spine to hold all of the ribs together, are about characters in crisis (like

every other movie). Or, better, to borrow from the Harry Crews quotation

above, their films are about characters in "moments of extremis," for the

crises of a Coen Brothers film extend beyond the dramatic or the tragic: they

are catastrophic rifts in the characters' experience of the world. Further, in

keeping with Crews' line of thought, these moments of crisis demand actions

and decisions, which the Coens' characters almost always make without

foreseeing the consequences and which they either engage in without much reflection (as do Abby and Ray in *Blood Simple,* Hi and Ed in *Raising Arizona,* Jerry in *Fargo,* Miles in *Intolerable Cruelty,* Chad and Linda in *Burn After Reading*), or, alternatively, they get lost in their ruminations (as do Tom in *Miller's Crossing,* Barton in *Barton Fink,* and Larry in *A Serious Man*), or both (as do the Dude and his crew in *The Big Lebowski*; Everett in *O Brother, Where Art Thou*; Ed in *The Man Who Wasn't There*; Professor Dorr in *The Ladykillers*; and Llewelyn in *No Country for Old Men*). Whichever tendency predominates, the result is that the initial crisis spins out, centrifugally expanding the original crisis into others that become correlates of it.[1] These "moments of extremis" are often so absurdly stretched temporally that the Coens' dramatic films, even when (or especially when) it seems inappropriate, breach into the realm of comedy. In this way, the dramatic absurdity of Camus's existential "moment," the present, the right now, in a sense, gets exploded, and the ludicrousness of the copresence of "man" and "world" becomes, as with Camus's own theory of the absurd, a universal,

---

[1] This tendency is not unlike the one that overtakes Meursault in Camus's *The Stranger.* Camus presents Meursault's offences against social and filial conventions early on in the novel as correlates of the murder of the Arab at the end of the first book, and his "moments of extremis" are exploded, just as they are for the Coens' characters. In those passages in which Meursault suffers under the blazing gaze of the sun, the passage of time seems to slow down: "It was the same sun, the same light still shining as before. For two hours the day had stood still; for two hours it had been anchored in a sea of molten lead . . . . The sun was the same as it had been the day I'd buried Maman" (58). Meursault's catastrophe too, then, begins in the mundane banalities of a few social indiscretions at the old folks home where his mother had died, and through some absurd logic, these "sins" implicate him in the gaze of the sun. It seems to be this sense of implicatedness that sets out the trajectory before him that leads him to murder, imprisonment, and the guillotine.

applicable to the entire diegetic reality of the film (Camus, "An Absurd Reasoning" 23). And as the films situate human beings in ever-expanding "moments of extremis," they sometimes find out *who* they are. But when Coen characters make this leap to self-discovery, they frequently reflect Camus's maceration of the Socratic imperative to "know thyself": "Forever I shall be a stranger to myself" (Camus, "An Absurd Reasoning" 15). In such moments of enlightenment, they finally glimpse who they are, and they fail to recognize the image, or the weight of the knowledge is more than they can bear.

Geoffrey Galt Harpham's analysis of "The Grotesque as Interval," in *On the Grotesque: Strategies of Contradiction in Art and Literature*, situates such exploded moments as fertile sites for grotesquery (14). "The grotesque occupies a gap or interval," Harpham writes; "it is the middle of a narrative of emergent comprehension" (15). Harpham, relying on Santayana, argues that the latter's theorization of the "interval" between apprehension and comprehension of phenomena provides a space for the confusion that the grotesque impinges upon those who behold it (15). Santayana suggests that when struck by the grotesque, interpreters essentially have two options: consider it for its "distortion of an ideal type," in which people meet the object with confusion by which they are sent into "retreat with their categories intact," or consider the grotesque object for its "inward possibility," a path which embraces and extends confusion for the hope of discovery, ultimately culminating in allowing "what had first appeared impossible or ludicrous to '[take] its place among recognized ideals'" (15). Harpham claims:

>The interval of the grotesque is the one in which . . . we have not
>
>yet developed a clear sense of the dominant principle that
>
>defines it and organizes its elements. Until we do so we are
>
>stuck, aware of the presence of significance . . . but unable to
>
>decipher the codes. Resisting closure, the grotesque impales us
>
>on the present moment, emptying the past and forestalling the
>
>future. An identical force sustains the knower and the known,
>
>for this interval is the temporal analogue of the grotesque object,
>
>with its trammeling of energy and feeble or occluded formal
>
>principle. (16)

But, for Harpham, this confusion, into which the experience of the grotesque

forces those who take the philosopher's path of "inward possibility," leads to

new ways of thinking, leads to new knowledge, "generating the interpretive

activity that seeks closure" in some thoughtful discovery or explanation, even

if the experience of the grotesque in the interval threatens those who attempt

to brave it with agony, madness, and despair (18).

Harpham's theory has certain potentially fruitful parallels with

the sketch of the Coen leitmotif above, with the exception, perhaps, of the last

move, that of "the interpretive activity that seeks closure," by which one

arrives at some satisfactory theory or explanation. Some of their films provide

a kind of closure, but not in a way that allows characters or viewers to

effectively move past the confusion or the mystery of the grotesque in absurd

collisions of humans with their "world." Their characters certainly reach the

moments of new knowledge, but these moments are more likely to be signaled

with a bout of nausea or a vacant stare than they are with a look of intellectual

satisfaction at finally figuring out a way to codify a heretofore inexplicable

experience because knowledge in Coen films is often the kind that wounds.

Much of the critical work on the Coens seems more aligned with Santayana's

first path, as many critics attempt to circumscribe the weirdness or quirkiness

of a Coen film by merely cataloging its precedents, allusions, and associations

with earlier films, other filmmakers, and works of literature, which is,

perhaps, why the brothers have gained a reputation among many critics as

postmodern pastiche-artists.[2] Their films envision worlds in which humans

are locked within Harpham's "purgatorial stage of understanding during

which the object appears as 'a jumble and distortion of other forms,'" a stage

analogous to Camus's exploded "moment" and Crews' "moments of extremis"

(Harpham 15; Camus, "An Absurd Reasoning" 23). Their most prescient

characters are the ones who discover that what Harpham calls the "interval" is

really the universal and that even if they try to invent ways to live amid the

confusion—the absurd grotesquery—of the world, their questions will never

find adequate answers, and the explanations they seek will forever fall short of

satisfying them: things will never "make sense" (this notion is the thematic

core of their latest film, *A Serious Man*). Even in the films that offer a kind of

closure or an "answer" (for example, *Raising Arizona; The Hudsucker Proxy;*

---

[2] For discussions of the Coens and postmodernism, pastiche, culture,
reception, etc. see Chapter 2: "The Coen Brothers: Postmodern Filmakers,"
(especially pages 44-45 and 51-60) of R. Barton Palmer's *Joel and Ethan
Coen*. See also Allan Smithee's "What Condition the Postmodern Condition Is
In: Collecting Culture in *The Big Lebowski*." *The Year's Work in* Lebowski
Studies, 255-75.

Fargo; Intolerable Cruelty; O Brother, Where Art Thou; or *The Ladykillers*),

it is usually so obviously false, overly simple, or utterly ludicrous to the

viewers—even if the characters have convinced themselves of its validity—that

the tension between what the film tells its viewers and what it allows the

characters to know or think sends those who attempt to interpret the film

right back to Harpham's epistemological purgatory.

Harpham argues, "All grotesque art threatens the notion of a center by

implying coherencies just out of reach, metaphors or analogies just beyond

our grasp . . . [It] teases us with intimations of 'deep' or 'profound' meanings"

(43). He grounds his theory historically in citing the transition from

Renaissance *grottesche* style, a decorative style imitative of the of the images

found in Nero's palace in 1480, which is literally restricted to the margins, the

borders in *grottesche*, to the grotesque, as such, in which the threat of

unwieldy meaning on the margins is more fully realized, and "swapping places

with the center," "synthesis itself" through "the reconciling of apparently

incompatible elements" becomes its guiding aesthetic principle (47, 45).3 In a

way, the Coens' film corpus can be read on a parallel to this aspect of

Harpham's theory, especially in their pilfering of outdated acting styles from

early cinema, now generally used in films only marginally here and there for

comic effect (Comentale 238-239). In the works of the Coens such acting

---

3 A similar "swapping" of periphery and center can be seen in the
Coens' focus of subject matter on characters who are, in Andy Lowe's words,
"either moronic or mad," a charge to which Joel Coen responded, "[M]ost of
our characters are pretty unpleasant . . . But we're also very fond of those
characters, because you don't often see movies based around those kinds of
people" (Lowe 164).

styles are synthesized and centralized in films that marry incompatible

generic references to one another, as Ronald Bergan notices in his biography

of the brothers, published in 2000:

> All their movies are comedies, and all of them, excepting *The*
>
> *Hudsucker Proxy*, are fundamentally *films noir*, disguised as
>
> horror movie (*Blood Simple*), farce (*Raising Arizona*), gangster
>
> movie (*Miller's Crossing*), psychological drama (*Barton Fink*),
>
> police thriller (*Fargo*), comedy (*The Big Lebowski*), social
>
> drama (*O Brother, Where Art Thou*). Yet, however different they
>
> are on the surface, each of the films contains elements of the
>
> other, horror edging into comic-strip farce, violence into
>
> slapstick and vice versa. (26-27)

The synthesizing tendency—the move to knit together the margins of film

history—rarely "passes for 'realism,'" as Bergan also observes (27). The Coens'

films are thus highly stylized, as are most grotesques, and it is this aspect of

their films that has proven to be the primary complaint among critics, going

back to Pauline Kael and Jim Hoberman: that their films, as R. Barton Palmer

summarizes,

> are all flash and no substance . . . . They are merely pointless
>
> deconstructions or hybridizations of familiar generic categories,
>
> art objects that become, in Hoberman's phrase, 'lost in a hall of
>
> mirrors.' They offer no engagement with the 'real' or with
>
> 'history' (45).

The distance between this complaint and Harpham's characterization of the threat of the grotesque to the "notion of a center," implying meaning or coherence just beyond one's grasp, seems negligible (Harpham 43).

Besides, as I have been trying to point out, the Coens' films do engage a certain version of the "real," or at least the existential; they just tend to concentrate it within exploded "moments of extremis" (Crews in *Searching*). And to return one more time to the Crews quote to extrapolate another morsel of meaning: the Coens engage "Man, being what he is," in ways that I have already alluded to and that the rest of this essay will focus on—that is, humans in their world as embodied creatures within but alienated from dramatically charged time and space—bodies that must act, react, or be acted upon in extreme situations (Crews' "jump left, jump right—when he can't stay where he's at."). And in the remainder of this essay, I will, in effect, be chasing bodies through the films of the Coen brothers, attempting to tease out the theories above by locating what Philip Thomson calls "the *physical* nature" of the grotesque, and

> the possibility that our laughter at some kinds of the grotesque and the opposite response—disgust, horror, etc.—mixed with it, are both reactions to the physically cruel, abnormal or obscene; the possibility, in other words, that alongside our civilized response something deep within us, some area of our unconscious, some hidden but very much alive sadistic impulse makes us react to such things with unholy glee and barbaric delight. (8-9)

II

Most of the Coens' films revolve thematically around crises in exploded moments, as I outlined above. All of the films are, in essence, about painfully mundane characters, "losers or lunkheads, or both," as Joel Coen puts it in an interview with Andy Lowe, whose lives are spinning out into confusion as they are struck with the catastrophic, as "man" and "world" collide in a crisis that refuses to die (164). Brief analyses of this theme as a narrative tactic in *Blood Simple* and *The Big Lebowski* will provide a vantage point from which to see this thematic tendency in the Coens' other films. While *Blood Simple* treats the catastrophic as the consequence of a character action/decision in response to a crisis that takes place before the film even begins, *The Big Lebowski* depicts the world's intrusion upon its central character, which ignites catastrophe and, likewise, calls for decisive action.

The first shots of *Blood Simple* are of Texas landscapes—barren, desolate, bleak—with a voiceover narration supplied by the film's villain, Visser, about how alone one is in Texas, how "something can always go wrong," and how no one will help when it does. The second sequence depicts Ray driving Abby to Houston at night. She is fleeing her husband, Marty, whom she is afraid of and whom she fears she will kill if she does not leave. Already, then, in the first moments of the film, the scene is set: Abby, as Crews would put it, has jumped left. A crisis has interrupted her otherwise mundane Texas life, and she has reacted. The first two sequences lay this out

very neatly, though, as not only a clash between Abby and her husband, but also a clash between individuals, really any of the main characters, and "the world," the ambiguously barren realm of everything that is "out there," which the establishing landscape shots, and particularly the one of the blank billboard in the equally blank desert, signify.[4] Nearly every action that a character takes in *Blood Simple* is a reaction built around Abby's original crisis moment, and nearly every move turns out to be the wrong one, as that initial move—having Ray drive her away—explodes, eventually costing every character's life (the primary ones: Marty, Visser, Ray) except for Abby's, which is preserved by sheer accident.

Cathleen Falsani claims that "*Blood Simple* is a meditation on free will" in her book, *The Dude Abides: The Gospel According to the Coen Brothers.* She writes, "No one in the film is coerced into making mistakes. Their undoing is entirely their own" (32). But such an argument would have to assume a concept of free will in an existential vacuum, which fails to account for the core problem of the film. James Mottram writes, in *The Coen Brothers: The Life of the Mind,* that "the film's central theme is communication breakdown" (20). He continues, "The characters only ever see part of the whole picture. This is a world where nothing is as it seems" (21). This gets closer to the point: the "world" for the Coens in this and many of their other films is everything outside of the individual subject—time and

---

[4] Interestingly, the billboard is an object specifically intended for the communication of something, and yet it is blank. Like the landscape, or together with it, the billboard communicates not "nothing," but rather that there is nothing more to communicate than sheer desolation. The accidents remain, but the message is gone.

space, but also other people, who, especially in their attempts to communicate, display the meaninglessness that characterizes the absurd in their ridiculous pantomime of the humanity the subject shares (Camus, "An Absurd Reasoning" 10-11). The absurdity and grim comedy of the film turn on the hinge of this tension: the "moments of extremis" demand immediate responses, but no one in the film has enough perspective to make the right move or an informed decision about what to do or how to act. They do not really have the "free will" Falsani ascribes to them because their clash with the world suspends them in a "purgatorial stage of understanding" where everything is a jumbled confusion in which they are already implicated in some way and which also demands that they act now (Harpham 15).

On the opposite end of the spectrum for this theme in the Coens' films is *The Big Lebowski*. Here, the world quite literally intrudes upon the Dude shortly after he is introduced as the protagonist of the film by the Stranger. A victim of mistaken identity, the Dude is thrust into a world of kidnapping, avant-garde art, high society, the pornography industry, intrigue, and violence all through force but completely by accident: the impingement of the interval is an intrusion. But the upshot is the same. Even though the catastrophic engages him and his world, which is, again, a painfully mundane mélange of bowling, drinking, driving around, smoking pot, and bickering with those in his small circle (mostly just Walter and Donny), when he is hailed by the world in a moment of crisis, he must act; he must respond, even if the response is called for by an ambiguous outside world that quite literally comes out of the darkness from every direction (most of those scenes in which his

"moment" reduplicates and becomes more complex are shot at night). Further, every move he makes throughout the film (or every move that is made for him or forced upon him) hinges upon the initial intrusion by the Treehorn thugs, who are looking for another Jeffrey Lebowski with whom the Dude, quite by chance, happens to share a name. Most of the other Coen films work with one or the other or some elements of both of these narrative scenarios to some degree. So, whether the mundane lives of their "congress of misfits" (as Ethan Coen puts it) collide with the catastrophic through some fault of their own—that is, through some short-sighted act/decision engaged in to deal with a crisis—or through a mere accident or impingement of fate, which then demands action/decision anyway, the conclusion is the same: the characters are caught at a crossroads-moment with the catastrophic, and no matter what they do, that moment seems inescapable, and it multiplies, explodes into a dizzying swirl of extensions and unexpected ramifications (qtd. in Ciment and Niogret 167). And, if Harpham is correct, such exploded moments of crisis or extremis are charged with potential for the grotesque, which "impales" characters or viewers "on the present moment, emptying the past and forestalling the future" (16). They are moments buzzing with chaotic energy, and they leave people anxiously grasping for some way to make sense of the confusion.

Both *Blood Simple* and *The Big Lebowski* also offer scenes that provide visual metaphors for this theme that are stitched into the narrative. In *Blood Simple*, it is the scene in which Ray, assuming Abbie has killed Marty, attempts to dispose of his body. Marty, in a sense, becomes the bodily

signifier of crisis that continues to multiply. The whole sequence refers back to this theme. At first discovering Marty's body, Ray attempts to clean up the blood with a thin jacket, and the blood pool just smears everywhere; it actually seems to increase in volume with his repeated attempts to soak it up, even soaking through the bed sheets Ray puts in the back seat of his car long after Marty is in the ground. Ray transports the body to a field in the middle of nowhere, and when he returns to the car after scouting out the landscape, Marty is missing. He discovers that Marty is still alive, worming an escape attempt on the ground. The scene continues for nearly twenty minutes without music or dialog, only Ray's grunting, sighing, and labored breathing and Marty's groaned attempts to threaten Ray. This aspect heightens the tension, but the scene is mercilessly comical for its baroque extension of the theme it metaphorizes: Ray has already responded to the crisis moment of finding the body; now he is implicated, but when he discovers Marty to be alive, he is struck with a new crisis, one more extreme than the last but linked to it, and he hesitates, weighs his options, but will have to respond again. After realizing he cannot muster the will to run the dying man over with his car, or whack him with a crowbar or a shovel, he decides just to bury him, letting Marty squirm and moan unintelligibly as Ray digs the hole, rolls him in, disarms his impotent attempt to shoot him, and begins shoveling dirt on him.

In *The Big Lebowski*, aspects of the Dude's first dream sequence serve a similar purpose in becoming metaphoric of the version of the crossroads of the mundane and the catastrophic that this film offers. After establishing the

mistaken identity plotline and introducing the interruption of the catastrophic into the Dude's otherwise mellow existence, the Dude is knocked unconscious by Maude and her crew. The narrative follows him into unconsciousness and viewers share his dream, which effectively symbolically recapitulates the Dude's take on what has happened to him so far in the film: He was gliding along peacefully until he was sucked into the world. The dream depicts this with a shot of the Dude flying over Los Angeles, guided by his bowling ball, and suddenly he is careening towards the ground. The next scene finds the Dude miniaturized in a bowling lane, where he is sucked into the finger-hole of a rolling bowling ball. The camera then issues a shot from the Dude's disoriented perspective inside the bowling ball looking out as it rolls and crashes into a set of pins. This scene refers back to the rolling tumbleweed in the desert, used to signify the Dude's independence and suitability for his place and time in the first shots of the film, as well as to the stylized shots of bowlers in their own brief crisis moments when the ball is their world—those seconds between releasing the ball and watching it strike the pins—which serve as the backdrop for the credits and title.

Whether one is discussing the crisis that won't lie down and die in *Blood Simple* or the one that forcibly imposes itself on the subject in *The Big Lebowski*, as these visual metaphors for the alternative ways in which the Coens tend to integrate the catastrophic clash of their characters and the world demonstrate, there is something ludicrous or absurd about such collisions, but also something disorienting, violent, and anxiety-producing. Further, as both of these examples also demonstrate, the most poignant

aspect of the character at the crossroads with the world is that all of the internal confliction, confusion, anxiety, and disorientation has to be represented physically—through the body, by or in actions or inaction, by or in expressions or moments when characters look expressionless: the goofy smile of the Dude as he flies over LA in his dream or his Shaggy/Scoobie Doo screaming when something goes wrong; Ray's stoic attempts not to show the internal despair outwardly and its manifestation in his body in sickness, insomnia, and loss of appetite or his dull, sinking gaze, and near speechlessness in the scene at the pay phone when Abby seems to know nothing of Marty's death. To return to the montage of bowlers that introduces *The Big Lebowski* for a moment: the men are shown rolling the ball, the shots often slowing their motion to isolate and extend those seconds when they are not in control, when the result of their action is undetermined; these shots capture physical responses to the anxiety and investment of what the bowlers have riding on the roll—their implication in the outcome. And this sequence is weirdly funny, repulsive, even tragic in a way, as these men uncontrollably fall into physically performed rituals for exorcizing their internal tensions in "moments of extremis." And the film portrays these moments as if they were the key moments of their lives. But, then again, this is the kind of irony the Coens are known for depicting. It may be the peculiarity of the outward expressions of the inward machinations associated with the themes I have been discussing so far that give the Coens' films their characteristic quirkiness that make them recognizable as Coen Brothers films.

III

In a revealing comment in his article, "The Joel and Ethan Story," John H. Richardson observes that the Coens' *Miller's Crossing*, "is a movie teeming with caricatures that keep revealing real characters underneath." He cites a few pieces of evidence: "We see a buffoonish gangster, then meet his child, we see a tough guy, then meet his male lover. Even a dead man still has a toupee between him and the bald truth. It's an unsettling combination of the grotesque and the touching" (81). James Mottram, in his book, observes the similar point about the seeming disjuncture between the caricatural tone established through the stylized acting in the film and the human depth that the characters turn out to have, noting that, though the film "rollicks in the silliness of the [gangster] genre, [it] still somehow plumbs the depths of human emotion" (61). Similar appraisals of the Coens' characters abound in the critical work on the films. Whether it is *Raising Arizona*'s characters, which a review in *Variety* paints as "so strange. . . that they seem to have stepped out of late-night television, tabloid newspapers, talk radio" in the film's display of "the surrealism of everyday life," or Eddie Robson's consideration of the heightened sense of banality of the characters in *Fargo* in his book *Coen Brothers*, Coen characters reflect a certain affinity with cartoon characters, as George Seesslen, among others, discusses briefly in "Crimewave" (Rev. of *Raising Arizona* 45; Robson 165; Seesslen 30-32). But within or underneath their exaggerated, cartoonish physicality are fully conceived, round characters.

This quality in the Coens' films, and particularly in *The Big Lebowski*, is the focus of Edward P. Comentale's essay, "'I'll Keep Rolling Along': Some Notes on Singing Cowboys and Bowling Alleys in *The Big Lebowski*. Comentale unearths an earlier, more "gestural mode" of acting, which has "slowly faded from cinematic experience," that markedly departs from the attempts at "psychological realism" in character portrayals that have become the cinematic norm (239). The Coens, in exhuming this "gestic mode," Comentale argues, "revive not only the melodramatic modes of action and characterization," "but even the jerky histrionics" of an earlier age of filmmaking (239). He points to Hi McDonnough's round up of the Arizona quintuplets in *Raising Arizona* and to Everrett McGill's boxing scene in the Woolworth's in *O Brother, Where Art Thou?* as performances that "are nothing if not gestural—radically externalized, inhumanly plastic, cartoonish even" (239). Comentale appeals to Roberta E. Pearson's study, *Eloquent Gestures*, to argue that the primary difference between the acting styles, or "codes," which Pearson refers to as the "histrionic code" and the "verisimilitude code" is predicated on the degree of physicality, as Comentale summarizes:

> With the histrionic code, each gesture was magnified, intensified, and accelerated, performed broadly on the physical body for the common body. The verisimilitude code, by contrast, works to establish the individuality of the character and the existential isolation of the moment. (241)

Comentale remarks that the view of the Coens as "brainy postmodern aesthetes" may effectively be challenged by "situating their work within a long cinematic tradition of popular gesturalism," noting that "their presentation of bodies ataxic, dystonic, or generally spastic" is not unlike the stylized distinctiveness and reflexivity of the popular "singing cowboy" westerns (240). In these films, he observes, quoting Peter Stanfield, the "focus was on act of performance": "horse chases, fistfights, courtship, slapstick comedy . . . , and the music. Rather than understand performance as an act of illusion where the trick is to convince viewers that they are not watching actors, the series western celebrated performance as an act of value in and of itself," and these representations responded to the "fears and desires" of the lower and working classes (qtd. in Comentale 240). This tendency in the work of the Coens, Comentale continues, *seems* to tap into "what Miriam Hansen has called 'vernacular modernism,' a loosely connected collection of popular forms that seem to 'register, respond to, and reflect upon processes of modernization and the experience of modernity'" and may reflect an attempt to explore a "universal language of mimetic behavior" that speaks to the common crises of people living their lives in the perplexing space of modernity (241).

Well, yes and no, for there *is* something markedly postmodern to the aesthetics within which the Coens make their films, and, while the appeals to the "gestic code" may reflect the problems of modernism, though through a postmodern lens, they do not do so as optimistically as an ascription of Hansen's "vernacular modernism" would entail. The extreme use of gesture in

their films is too extravagant to be explained as an attempt to explore a "universal language of mimetic behavior" (Comentale 241). In fact, physicality (or the gestic code) in the Coens' films is so often employed with such grotesque gratuitousness that it seems to communicate very little beyond itself. Consider the sheer physicality of the baroquely over-wrought chase scene in *Raising Arizona* or any scene in which Gale and Evelle figure: the belching, screaming, whooping, eating, drinking, smoking, excessive speaking (sometimes all at once)—the sheer excess of movement—it all goes well beyond an attempt to develop characters or serve the purposes of plot. The same excess of physical gesture is present in *Miller's Crossing* when Leo defends himself against a mob hit from the Italians: After methodically killing one of the men as succinctly as possible, he machine-guns the other repeatedly from a distance, sending the man's body into a kind of grimly comic dance, donned the "Thomson Jitterbug" by the Coens, and as he flails his arms and shuffles his feet as he continues to fire his own Tommy gun, the man shoots off his own toes, as "Oh Danny Boy" climaxes ironically on the soundtrack (Robson 85). In the same film, in the hit on the Sons of Erin Social Club, when an old man emerges from the door waving a white flag, he is shot by a man from the Italian gang, after which his body convulses for a number of seconds on the ground as the men look on laughing to each other. The list goes on, and one could point to Barton's excessive ticks in *Barton Fink*, or Jerry's frequent fits of ineffectual hysterics, or his wife's comedic attempts to escape her kidnappers, or nearly any scene with the seething Carl, or those in which Gaear erupts into violence in *Fargo*. Comentale points to the "frantic,

hostile" quality of the "gestic body" in *The Big Lebowski*, and one could point to similar qualities in most any other of their films. In some sense, the histrionic code is about a self-referential focus of attention on bodies as "means of performance," an exhibition of sheer physicality. But in addition to the Coens' excessive rendition of this code, there is another aspect to which I have alluded in the examples listed above: "its incredible negativity" (Comentale 241).

David Sterritt argues, in "*Fargo* in Context," that the Coens work "carnivalism and grotesquerie" into their films through "distorted forms of body language to signal the inability of individuals to dwell harmoniously in the social world that surrounds and contains them" (20). And Comentale similarly ties their "return to gesture" in succession with the modernist "bourgeois obsession with a significant failure of communication" (242). Following Giorgio Agamben, Comentale argues that the gestic codes of acting in early cinema "exemplify the death throes of the bourgeois public culture, a last ditch effort to record, scientifically, the expressive language of gesture as it slipped through their fingers," an attempt to highlight and capture "gestures that no longer perform their social function" (242). And this theory, he claims, is closer to how the Coens use the gestic code in their films. He observes that in the Coens' work gesture is frequently "born of frustration and obsessively repeated," as with Bernie in *Miller's Crossing*; Barton in *Barton Fink*; Jerry and Carl in *Fargo*; Walter and the Dude in *The Big Lebowski*; Ozzie and Harry in *Burn After Reading*; Larry and Arthur in *A Serious Man* (242). Further, gestures seem to emerge as communication breaks down—when

words fail, when meaning falls flat—"and so they inevitably grow monstrous, extreme, oppressive": "At moments of extreme linguistic frustration, the characters spazz without restraint" and often engage in gesture reminiscent of those of characters and acting styles of the silent film era (243). Paul Caughlin, in "Acting for Real: Performing Characters in *Miller's Crossing* and *Fargo*," suggests that such physical exhibitions of reaction or loss of control, especially those that take place when the characters are "diegetically alone," reveal their "true" selves (235-36).

There are other characters who are nearly catatonic or seem to refuse communication or have some inability to gesture. In the case of characters like the Dane in *Miller's Crossing*, Gaear and Shep in *Fargo*, and Chigurh in *No Country for Old Men*, the general woodenness of their physicality, flatness of affect, and lack of expression seems to indicate an antisocial disdain for communication, and when they do break into gesture and movement—when they do express themselves—it is almost always with shocking and sudden violence. Others, like Ray in *Blood Simple*, Pete (the elevator operator) in *Barton Fink*, Smokey and little Larry Sellers in *The Big Lebowski*, Ed in *The Man Who Wasn't There*, the General and Lump in *The Ladykillers*, and Rabbi Minda in *A Serious Man*, seem to have given up on communication (Ray and Ed), are too old, too burned out, or too dumb to communicate aptly (Pete, Rabbi Minda, Smokey, Lump), or they simply refuse for undisclosed reasons (Larry Sellars and the General). Coughlin points to Tom's constant poker face and minimal communication style in *Miller's Crossing* as an act of performance, an intentional projection of a flat, tough guy personality, which

Tom hides within and uses to manipulate the impressions others have of him; such a theory could apply (at least to some degree) to a character like Chigurh in *No Country for Old Men* as well (229). Regardless of the reasons, the "communicative dysfunction" represented in the flatly uncommunicative is the other side of the coin of the gestic code that Comentale is interested in. He concludes that, for the Coens, gesture is conceived as existing "outside the orbit of mundane communication, and in its release from any specific social use, it now reveals the human body as the exhibition of mediality in the very process of making itself a means" (245).

It is through exaggerated bodily gesture or its nearly comatose, though equally odd, inversion, then, that the Coens signify the interiorized anxieties, frustrations—the inner turmoil—that characters experience as the result of their clash with the world. And it is precisely the excessively gestural physicality of the bodies of characters expressing this inner turmoil, even if nothing is effectively communicated to anyone else, that ties the peculiarity of the acting styles in the Coens' films to the markedly physical nature of the grotesque that Thomson describes. In a rather interesting manner, then, the Coens revise the histrionic or gestic code in light of the meaning that Pearson associates with the verisimilitude code. By making the bodily histrionics grotesque through sheer and gratuitous excessiveness, as well as through the unrelenting negativity and violence that frequently accompany it, and by utilizing this revised code in largely modernist narratives that rely on the tensions of exploded moments of extremis for their punch, the Coens merge the "common body" with "the existential isolation of the moment," resulting

in films that are as much about the "exhibition of performance" as they are about the emergence of that frantic exhibition at points when all other meaning fails (Comentale 239-40). The gestures are, perhaps, still performed "on the physical body for the common body"; the difference is just that the "common body" for the worlds of the Coens' films is inextricably trapped in the absurd tragicomedy of the existential moment. Their images are not unlike the one Camus invokes towards a similar purpose in "An Absurd Reasoning":

> Men, too, secrete the inhuman. At certain moments of lucidity, the mechanical aspect of their gestures, their meaningless pantomime makes silly everything that surrounds them. A man is talking on the telephone behind a glass partition; you cannot hear him, but you see his incomprehensible dumb show: you wonder why he is alive. This discomfort in the face of man's own humanity, this incalculable tumble before the image of what we are, this "nausea," as a writer of today calls it, is also the absurd. (11)

IV

The body in the Coen brothers' films is an unruly object. Very few of their characters reflect anything like dominant Hollywood norm for attractiveness, as Makita Brottman observes with reference to *Fargo*, though the point could be applied to any of their films: "There is hardly a

conventionally handsome face or traditionally appealing body among the film's odd cast, whose corporeality often verges on the grotesque" (77). Those characters whose bodies are, perhaps, closer to the "dominant cinematic aesthetic," seem "on the verge of being betrayed by their bodies, over which they seem to have little control" (78). She refers here to Jerry and Wade from *Fargo*, whose "mounting anxiety" finds release in violent little tantrums and frequent bouts of flailing, in the case of the former, while the latter's "thickness" is so thoroughly represented in his physicality that his body hardly registers being shot by Carl before he falls to the ground. Further, in the cases of those actors whose characters would initially seem to be exceptions to the rule, like George Clooney or Brad Pitt, the overbearing use of the gestic code in acting paints their characters as increasingly and ridiculously comical. In Clooney's roles as Everrett, Miles, and Harry in *O Brother, Where Art Thou; Intolerable Cruelty;* and *Burn After Reading* (respectively), he demonstrates his knack for the exaggeratedly cartoonish movement and register of emotion associated with the gestic code in Coen films. And in *Burn After Reading*, Chad's (Pitt's) good looks are part of the comic aspects of his character: a mixture of "dumb blonde" and "fitness junky" associations come to bear on a man whose funniest moments in the film are when he attempts to play serious for the sake of blackmailing a CIA analyst. Further, when the Pitt and Clooney's characters share a scene in *Burn After Reading*, Harry immediately shoots Chad in the head and then must dispose of his beautiful body, a scene in which the comic and violently negative aspects of the Coens' use of the gestic code come together with a number of other aspects to situate the

otherwise light-hearted spy movie knock-off in the vein of the blackly comic

grotesque. Catherine Zeta Jones' role as Marilyn in *Intolerable Cruelty* is

almost literally the "exception that proves the rule," for, though her character

moves, speaks, and carries herself with grace, the film depends upon such

attributes to establish the character of Marilyn as a duplicitous gold-digger.

Moreover, her girlfriends in the film—presented as older, more experienced

"types" of Marilyn herself—are all portrayed as fixated on their former beauty,

and frequently discuss their cosmetic surgeries, spa treatments, etc., all of

which drive the theme of the frivolity and duplicity associated with such

refined beauty in the film. All of this coalesces in effectively ironizing

Marilyn's own beauty.

Enough with exceptions: the characters the Coens are known for are

either too fat or too skinny by the standards associated with the "dominant

cinematic aesthetic": they are "kinda funny lookin'. More than most people

even," as one of the prostitutes remarks of Carl when questioned by Marge in

Fargo (Brottman 78). Even more than this, bodies in Coen films are afflicted

with uncontrollable giggles (Visser in *Blood Simple*, Nox in *The Big Lebowski*,

the Hudsucker executives in *The Hudsucker Proxy*); menstrual cramps or

reproductive problems (an oversized male prisoner and Edwina in *Raising*

Arizona); uncontrollable appetite for food or drink/alcoholism (Gale and

Evelle in *Raising Arizona*, Bill in *Barton Fink,* Marge in *Fargo,* the Dude in

The Big Lebowski, Ozzie in *Burn After Reading*); unceasing verbosity (Mink

in *Miller's Crossing*; Buzz in *The Hudsucker Proxy*; Carl in *Fargo*; Everrett in

O Brother, Where Art Thou; Frank in *The Man Who Wasn't There*); chain

smoking (Gaear in *Fargo*; Ed in *The Man Who Wasn't There*; the General in *The Ladykillers*); bouts of nausea/vomiting, or irritable bowel syndrome (Marty in *Blood Simple*, Tom in *Miller's Crossing*, Charlie and Bill in *Barton Fink*, Norville in *The Hudsucker Proxy*, Marge in *Fargo*, Mr. Pancake and Mountain Girl in *The Lakykillers*, Llewellyn in *No Country for Old Men*); serious (and audible) respiratory problems (Arthur Digby Sellers in *The Big Lebowski*, Herb, along with a number of other ailments, and Wheezy Joe in *Intolerable Cruelty*), and continuing to live when, for all practical purposes, they should be dead (Marty in *Blood Simple*, Herb in *Intolerable Cruelty*, Reb Groshkover in *A Serious Man*), not to mention Arthur's sebaceous cyst in *A Serious Man*, which he is draining with a medical pump or blotting with a rag or simply clutching for most of the time his character is on screen. Bodies are also sights of ghastly acts of violence: they are beaten, shot, stabbed, exploded with hand grenades, buried alive, calculatedly dropped from bridges onto moving garbage barges, decapitated, dismembered, disemboweled, forced into woodchippers, choked, dragged by motorcycles, plugged with hydraulic cattle-killing devices, hanged, electrocuted, burned, scattered (in ashen form), and maimed or killed in car crashes. They are everywhere screaming, bleeding, oozing, convulsively weeping, laughing, farting, exaggeratedly breathing, and engaging in intercourse with one another. One bites the ear off of another; one ingests a prenuptial agreement with some barbecue sauce; another accidentally eats a cigarette; one fatally mistakes his pistol for his inhaler. The body in Coen films is unruly, unpredictable, uncontrollable; it is pathetically fragile, and it is unbelievably tenacious. Whatever it is or does in a

Coen film, the body "bespeaks its physicality" in ways that align with Bakhtin's theory of how the grotesque can "'carnivalize' the site of the body by emphasizing images of humanity anatomized and dismembered," as Brottman puts it, drawing attention to the "importance of inside-out and upside-down in movements and acts of the body, presenting a series of anatomical images that is essentially a reiteration of the human body *out of control*, and thereby made comic and ridiculous" (80-81, author's italics).5

Brottman emphasizes, though, that the "site of laughter" for such instances of the ridiculous or comical grotesque achieved by the "carnivalized body" "is the spectator, not the characters involved," for whom the threats and circumstances are often anything but funny (82). Laughter at such grotesquery is "libidinal"; it is associated with the tensions produced in what is conceived as the "bad taste" in "the mocking of the body" (82). This is the tension raised in us between what Thomson calls "our civilized response" and the deep-down, unconscious, "hidden but very much alive sadistic impulse" to laugh at such physical grotesquery with "unholy glee" (8-9). For Bakhtin, however, this conflicted response is more than just the result of opposing impulses, a notion through which Brottman aptly connects the theory to *Fargo*: "By parodying the mortifying incompetencies that render us powerless, by making us conscious of our vain pretences to order and dignity,

---

5 Paul Martin and Valarie Renegar also draw out the connection between *The Big Lebowski* and Bakhtin's theory of the carnivalesque in "'The Man for His Time': *The Big Lebowski* as Carnivalesque Social Critique." In this essay, they catalog the film's adherence to the carnival aesthetic, highlighting *The Big Lebowski*'s tendency toward inverting social hierarchies in the film's utilization of grotesque realism and "structural and grammatical experimentation" (304).

Fargo reminds us of the pitiful inescapability of our own 'funny-looking' bodies" (82). Given this dynamic tension and its relation to audience identification and laughter, our own embodiedness is signified in the tendency of the Coens' characters to be ever at the mercy of their bodies, "despite the claims of our 'higher consciousness,' and this is, Brottman continues, borrowing from Henri Bergson's *Laughter*, the "essence of comedy" (83-84). "The social significance of human laughter is always inextricably associated with hostility," Brottman states, and such uncomfortable laughter at the grotesque is mechanistic, an "intellectual response that serves the social purpose of assuaging discomfort over the unaccustomed and unexpected (84, 90). The laughter is multivalent: we laugh impulsively as an "outlet for those frustrations, tensions, and hostilities that have no other means of release in a society that seeks to exercise control over the aggressive drives of its members," and we laugh because we recognize ourselves in the characters, "and our risible bodies" in theirs (90).

The body in the Coens' films, then, reflects what Terry Eagleton refers to as the "somatic root" of Bakhtin's theory of the carnival grotesque in his chapter on Bakhtin in *Walter Benjamin or Towards a Revolutionary Criticism*: "carnival involves above all a pluralizing and cathecting of the body, dismantling its unity into freshly mobile parts and ceaselessly transgressing its limits" (150). Eagleton emphasizes Bakhtin's theme of investing the body with meaning precisely at the points of "erotic interchange" between the inside and outside, which is "somehow always an 'inside' too" (150). Such aestheticized images of the body as the Coens'—bodies

grotesquely mascerated or obliterated, bodies acted in or upon in odd ways, bodies seen devouring the world, bodies whose insides are leaking out in some way, bodies whose movements appear not to square with their reality—such bodies, then, reflect the carnival grotesque theorized by Bakhtin. And, frequently, their films also seem to reflect a humanity thoroughly situated in the festive realm, a kind of utopian vision of humanity's ultimate unity with the world or the possibility or dream of such unity, such as one could identify in *Raising Arizona;* perhaps *The Hudsucker Proxy*; *The Big Lebowski*; or *O Brother, Where Art Thou* (Bakhtin, *Rabelais* 46). But there are as many or more films to which such a conclusion seems completely foreign or, at the very least, fraught with problems.

So even if the body as the site of humanity's existential interchange with the world—and the inescapable context of his "moments of extremis"—reflects a form of Bakhtinian liberation through decrowning and degrading "the civilized" as such, many of their films fixate on themes more akin to the "spirit of existentialism" that Bakhtin seems to despise, but they do so by depicting the body in similar ways and circumstances (Bakhtin, *Rabelais* 49). *Blood Simple, Miller's Crossing, Barton Fink, The Man Who Wasn't There, No Country for Old Men, Burn After Reading,* and *A Serious Man* all exploit the grotesque in their treatment of bodies, and the conclusion of the crises in all of them ends rather tragically, even cynically in some cases (*Miller's Crossing, Burn After Reading,* and an argument of cynicism could probably be made for any of the others as well). The remainder, *Fargo, Intolerable Cruelty,* and *The Ladykillers,* close ambiguously, in ways that could be

interpreted as ultimately "life-affirming," though one could just as easily make arguments for these films' conclusions as myopic toward a point of irony or as obvious attempts at drawing tensions between the overly simplistic attitudes with which the characters are willing to see the drama end and the extradiegetic perspective of viewers that have seen the action unfold and cannot possibly be pacified with the pay-off. In these more dismal, abysmal renditions of the crisis moment and the bodies implicated in it, civilization is judged, but so is "life as a whole" (as Bakhtin would have it), and both are found wanting (Bakhtin, *Rabelais* 50).

V

In Cormac McCarthy's *No Country for Old Men*, there is an exchange between Chigurh and Carla Jean, just before Chigurh kills her, most of which is captured in the Coens' adaptation of the book, in which Chirgurh relates, with stunning acuteness, the philosophy according to which he understands the unfolding of events in the world, why he has to kill her, why it is nobody's fault, and why the coin toss is the most grace he can allot for her miserable situation. The coin toss, of course, does not go her way, and she responds:

> You make it like it was the coin. But you're the one.
>
> It could have gone either way.
>
> The coin didn't have no say. It was just you.
>
> Perhaps. But look at it my way. I got here the same way the coin did.

She sat sobbing softly. She didn't answer.

For things at a common destination there is a common path. Not always easy to see. But there.

Everything I ever thought has turned out different, she said. There ain't the least part of my life I could of guessed. Not this, not none of it.

I know.

You wouldn't let me off noway.

I had no say in the matter. Every moment in your life is a turning and every one a choosing. Somewhere you made a choice. All followed to this. The accounting is scrupulous. The shape is drawn. No line can be erased. I had no belief in your ability to move a coin to your bidding. How could you? A person's path through the world seldom changes and even more seldom will it change abruptly. And the shape of your path was visible from the beginning.

She sat sobbing. She shook her head.

Yet even though I could have told you how all of this would end I thought it not too much to ask that you have a final glimpse of hope in the world to lift your heart before the shroud drops, the darkness. Do you see?

Oh God, she said. Oh God.

She looked at him a final time. You don't have to, she said. You don't. You don't.

He shook his head. You're asking that I make myself vulnerable and that I can never do. I have only one way to live. It doesn't allow for special cases. A coin toss perhaps. In this case to small purpose. Most people don't believe that there can be such a person. You can see what a problem that must be for them. How to prevail over that which you refuse to acknowledge the existence of. Do you understand? When I came into your life your life was over. It had a beginning, a middle, and an end. This is the end. You can say that things could have turned out differently. That they could have been some other way. But what does that mean? They are not some other way. They are this way. You're asking that I second say the world. Do you see?

Yes, she said, sobbing. I do. I truly do.

Good, he said. That's good. Then he shot her. (258-60)

It is, perhaps, ironic that such a philosophy—one ambiguously caught somewhere between fate and accident, between free choice and determinism—should come into a Coen Brothers film by way of their adaptation of someone else's work, for many of their films revolve around the ambiguity, which Chigurh states here so precisely, so confidently. Richard Gilmore sums it up this way, in his essay, *"No Country for Old Men*: The Coens' Tragic Western":

On the one hand, there is the inevitability, a sense that the world goes on in its way and that it does not have much to do with our human desires and concerns. On the other hand, there is a sense

that we contribute to our own inevitable futures with every
decision we make, with every act we commit, that what is
perhaps hardest to live with is not the inevitability that is the
result of the turning of the earth but the inevitability that is
associated with a future we are looking at that is the result of
what we have done in the past. (71)

In this way, then, when characters face this reality in times of crisis in which
their mundane lives are struck with the catastrophes toward which, according
to such a philosophy, their lives have been heading all along, the past is
sucked into the present moment, and the future is negated. They are stuck in
the middle, in an exploded moment, an endless present. Further, if such an
ambiguous relationship persists between human choice and its implications in
the inevitability of fate, that is, if, as Chigurh suggests, "The shape is drawn,"
and "All follow[s] to this," then every decision anyone makes is somehow
constitutive of "the world" that blindly governs fate for all (McCarthy 259).
The world is everything outside the self, but also implicates the self because it
requires actions/decisions from the self at every turn that inevitably lead to
"moments of extremis," or death, or both at once. This is why Chigurh is such
a chilling villain: he is the agent of such inevitability and interconnectedness
in the world, for, as Dieter Meindl argues, the "existential dimension" (what
Bakhtin refers to in positive terms in medieval and Renaissance culture as
"life as a whole"), for the modernist grotesque, becomes terrifying because
"total existence—Being—cancels out human consciousness"; it is the context
in which the "individual" as such is annihilated (19). But Chigurh, though

taken from McCarthy, is also a Coen "type," a force of nature, so to speak, with certain parallels to the agents of destruction in their other films, such as Visser in *Blood Simple*, the Lone Biker of the Apocalypse (Leonard Smalls) in *Raising Arizona*, perhaps the Dane in *Miller's Crossing* or Charlie in *Barton Fink*, Gaear in *Fargo*, parodied in the nihilists of *The Big Lebowski*, and Sheriff Cooley in *O Brother, Where Art Thou*. And in *The Man Who Wasn't There* and *A Serious Man*, the nature of evil, fate, and human choice/action, etc.—in short, life, death, and meaning—as with *No Country for Old Men*, become thematic centerpieces.

Whether comedy or tragedy predominates in a Coen Brothers film, both are always present. They achieve an ambiguity and tension in fusing the two poles and in appealing to the emotions in viewers associated with each at the same time. Many of their films rely on the intersection of the mundane and the catastrophic, and their characters never seem quite equipped to deal with it, and so the films are, in a way, tragic. But the exaggerated and excessive physicality in their films can make their grimmest scenes sites of comic grotesquery. Thematically, their films frequently focus on crisis moments in ways that seem to betray a kind of cynicism about meaning in human life, but therein is also the comedy, for, as Douglas McFarland observes in an essay about the Coens' "philosophies of comedy," comedy for the Coens is not so far from how Kierkegaard conceives of it in the *Concluding Unscientific Postscript to Philosophical Fragments*, and it is closely aligned with the tragic:

Kierkegaard asserts, "If the reason for people's hustle-bustle is a possibility of avoiding danger, then busyness is not comic; but if, for example, it is on a ship that is sinking, there is something comic in all this running around, because the contradiction is that despite all this movement they are not moving away from the site of their downfall." [. . .] For Kierkegaard [this] represents the contradiction that is intrinsic to comedy and to life . . . , the contradiction between our infinite aspirations and the finite realities that confront those aspirations [. . .], between our need to take action and the ultimate meaninglessness of that action. (46)

So, likewise, the Coens' focus on excessively physical depictions of such crisis moments, their extension of these moments through philosophically informed thematic devices and narrative tactics, and the comic cynicism that seems to underlie their films—all of this speaks to the contradictions that thrive when human finitude is struck with "the world"—when the mundane and the catastrophic intersect, and when that intersection demands some decision and/or action through which one attempts to sidestep the inevitable, and such extended or suspended moments are fertile fields for grotesquery.

CHAPTER VI

"LOST IN DARKNESS AND CONFUSION":

OBLITERATING THE SUBJECT IN THE FILMS OF DAVID LYNCH[1]

"Horace, in conceiving his hideous mermaid-beast, spoke of the inventions of a 'sick man's dreams.' In its shocking way, the modern grotesque appears to postulate that such a sick man's brain is possibly the lowest common denominator of the human condition itself."

—John R. Clark, *The Modern Satiric Grotesque and Its Traditions*

"To those artists who are engaged not only in wresting signs and symbols from the chaos of action, but also in mocking the complacency, coarseness and banality of the environment, the contamination of life is the core of existence. The world is estranged, life is absurd, the grotesque is the measure of all things, spiritual or material."

—Robert Doty, *Human Concern/Personal Torment*

I

Two recent studies of the uncanny in Lynch's films, Steven Jay Schneider's "The Essential Evil in/of *Eraserhead*" and the chapter entitled "'It

---

[1] Lynch qtd. in Rodley x.

is Happening Again': Experiencing the Lynchian Uncanny" in Allister MacTaggart's *The Film Paintings of David Lynch: Challenging Film Theory*, relate the concept in different ways. Schneider's essay attempts to "show how *Eraserhead* relies upon formal and thematic techniques familiar within the horror genre in order to engender its uncanny effects," while MacTaggart's broader thesis attempts to locate the uncanny—an "uneasy 'nonspecificity'"—as the haunting centerpiece of Lynch's film corpus by unearthing images of the home and the double (among others) (Schneider 5; MacTaggart 119). Anthony Vidler, Laura Mulvey, and Chris Rodley in essays published in the 1990s also make contributions in this vein of inquiry towards Lynch's films. But, while most invoke the grotesque in its adjectival sense, they are more concerned with theorizing the uncanny with respect to Lynch's engagement with film history/genre (Vidler 10), his film rhetoric (Mulvey 150), or for introductory purposes (Rodley ix-xi) than they are in unearthing Lynch's engagement with the grotesque and its overlaps with the uncanny. And in this chapter that is what I will attempt to do.

Lynch's short film, *The Amputee*, made for the purposes of testing filmstock in 1974 (Rodley 66), perhaps, best introduces this topic and suggestively invites the sort of critical attention that I would like to extend to his other works as well. Rodley's summary of the film in the filmography section of *Lynch on Lynch* reads like this:

> A woman sits, reading and composing a letter in her head. The correspondence apparently concerns a tangled emotional web of various relationships and misunderstandings. A doctor enters.

> He sits down in front of her, quietly treating and dressing the
> stump ends of her legs, both severed at the knee. The woman
> continues to work on her letter, without acknowledging either
> the doctor or the treatment in progress. (296)

The film is only five minutes long, but in the brief time that passes Lynch evokes both the grotesque and the uncanny, which I will discuss briefly and directly here, leaving the theoretical apparatus for the next section.

The disturbingly physical nature of the film is particularly grotesque, and the stationary camera's depiction does not shy away from the scene: throughout the brief time span the camera captures the woman's seated body, stumps and all, even to the point that the blocking and camera position required for the scene seem to ensure that the viewer always sees the stumps and sees the grisly "treatment" by the doctor, even though he sits between the camera and the patient. Further, the doctor's treatment is not as cleanly "clinical" as it sounds in Rodley's description: the doctor unwraps the stumps, and while the camera stares at the unhealed site of the amputations, he clips at them with a small tool, blots them with some gauze, and then seems to be draining fluid (audibly as well as visually) from them (perhaps accidentally? Is she bleeding out?), and then gets up to leave hurriedly, as if something may have gone awry, and there the film ends. The contrast between what seems to be the doctor's restrained panic near the end (as the fluid/blood flows out) and the fact that not only does the woman seem undisturbed, but that she seems not even to notice, as she goes on with the voiceover narration of the letter, is pronounced, absurd, and defies rational explanation. The visual

content of the film makes the clinical treatment seem both barbaric (audibly pricking at the stumps until they bleed or run) and professionally medical (the doctor wears the white coat, has a special tool and gauze, and moves with deliberate confidence). Further, tension, both grotesque and uncanny, arises when one considers the extremely personal nature of the doctor/patient relationship—something familiar to most people—and the nearly complete refusal of each character to acknowledge the other that seems the central irony of the film. Perhaps more disconcerting still is the fact that the environment is ambiguous: the woman seems to be at home (she is in a rather plush "easy chair" and she has a notepad, and appears to be in domestic surroundings), but the doctor is there performing a rather messy procedure. Another layer of mixed grotesque and uncanny has to do with the melodramatic/soap opera content of the letter the woman is composing, and in which she is completely lost, even as her insides literally drain out of her legs.

So, if the uncanny relies on the tension between the familiar made unfamiliar or of the unfamiliar in the familiar, it is certainly present here. How familiar is going to the doctor or composing a letter or explaining a complicated relationship? But how alien (to most anyway) is undergoing a stump treatment, or one (possibly) within one's own favorite chair at home . . . that goes wrong? And how caught up in the emotional entanglements of the letter would one have to be not to acknowledge a medical professional picking her unhealed stumps? And if the grotesque similarly relies on tensions produced by nonrational circumstances and conflicts of opposites, what easy

fodder there is for it here in *The Amputee*: any number of breeches of rationality or "normality," the oppositional conflict implied between the mind and the body, and the absurdity of the doctor/patient rapport all belong to the grotesque. The structural principles in *The Amputee* seem to ensure a heightened sense of grotesquery, and the uncanny effects of such grotesquery—the tensions between recognition and alienation, or an alienated familiarity—seem to marry the concepts, at least insofar as they find an uneasy home in this film. And this forms the thesis of this chapter: Lynch's films often rely on the grotesque in their evocations of the uncanny, and both are ultimately aimed at disclosing or enacting a rupture in the identity or "self" of the individual subject.

II

In his book, *American Fiction and the Metaphysics of the Grotesque*, Dieter Meindl argues that "while the grotesque is usually conceived as subverting the natural order of things, . . . it can also serve to evoke the nonrational dimension of life as such, a dimension that, in principle, is against ideas of pattern and order" (15). As he unpacks this assertion as an attempt to enfold the disparate theories of the grotesque espoused by Kayser and Bakhtin, Meindl subtly revises their positions for his own purposes, carefully reading each in light of the other in order to construct a theory that functions well for art produced in a modern (romantic/post-romantic) context. Meindl demonstrates that Kayser's grotesque is the "sphere of the

unfathomable, a familiar world in the process of dissolution, diffusing an aura that instills insecurity, revulsion, and terror and causes the disintegration of our sense of soundness, symmetry, and proportion" (15). Meindl identifies psychological alienation and madness among Kayser's central motifs. Such alienation functions through a "dreamlike or nightmare vision" that pierces "the façade of reason, normality, and certitude," intertwining realities that are usually kept apart (15).

In his shift to the carnivalesque grotesque, Meindl rightly centers in on "life as a whole," or "the totality of life," as the underlying concept of Bakhtin's "reconstituting semiotics of the human body," which, as Harpham claims, in *On the Grotesque: Strategies of Contradiction in Art and Literature*, is one of the "basic premises" on which Kayser and Bakhtin "manage to contradict each other utterly" (Meindl 17; Harpham xvii-xviii). For Bakhtin, the grotesque's reliance on "life as a whole" bars the horror and anxiety at the center of Kayser's theory (Bakhtin, *Rabelais* 50; Meindl 18). Bakhtin accuses Kayser and practitioners and theoreticians of the modern grotesque (if indeed it can be captured with the same signifier as its earlier manifestations in the medieval and Renaissance eras) of cultural amnesia, as remembering back only as far as the romantics and, as Meindl puts it, "neglecting the ancient roots of the grotesque and its origin in the apprehension of the double aspect of reality as exemplified by the duality of comic and serious myth" (Meindl 17-18).

After observing that the grotesque transcends this rift because it relies on and incorporates the tensions between opposites, since its central

characteristic in both scholars' theories (and any number of others) is self-

contradiction, Meindl concedes that the romantics effect a "far-reaching, but

not total, displacement" of the grotesque as Bakhtin conceives of it:

> The carnivalesque grotesque expressed the joy of life but
>
> remained related to fear.[2] Beginning with romanticism, the
>
> situation is reversed. The life-affirming message of the
>
> grotesque tends to fall into abeyance. Its bright pole becomes
>
> hard to locate. . . . [T]he existential message of the Bakhtinian
>
> grotesque, according to which "death is not a negation of life
>
> seen as the great body of all the people but part of life as a
>
> whole," is no longer quite compatible with direct literary
>
> expression. (19)

Relying on Ian Watt's study of the novel, Meindl claims that modern literature

is more aligned with "defining the nature of the individual" and attempts to be

truthful to "individual experience," rather than expressing "life in its totality"

(19). Further, to embrace such a conception (life as a whole) "spells the

obliteration of the individual":

> Total existence—Being—cancels out human consciousness: *Sein*
>
> is the mode of extinction of *Bewusstsein*, which as a
>
> phenomenon is always individual. The individual qua individual

---

[2] Meindl claims that Bakhtinian grotesque is "related to fear" through its transformation and conquering of it in a way not completely unrelated to the aesthetic hopefulness of Kayser's grotesque as a means to invoke and subdue—to exorcize—the demonic. In transforming/conquering the fearful aspects of the world by making them silly or by mocking them, the carnivalesque grotesque is still implicitly "related" to fear (Meindl 19).

> reacts with terror when confronted with the existential dimension, the sphere of his or her annihilation. Under such circumstances, the grotesque, which conveys this sphere, orients itself toward its dark pole. (19)

Meindl claims that the shift toward something more along Kayserian lines in romantic grotesque "is the very concomitant and consequence of the confrontation between a subjective and individualistic outlook . . . and what negates this outlook: all-embracing primordial life as conveyed by the grotesque," and an even grimmer version of this outlook pervades contemporary literature (19-20, 16).

So, the grotesque, then, in this later extension, Meindl claims, is employed as a strategy to demonstrate the rupture in the subject no longer able to identify itself harmoniously with the world, with the O/other, or even with itself. Robert Van Boeschoten clarifies this rupture (though in another context), borrowing from Sartre and Artaud:

> For Sartre, the "other" is hell because the "other" can cancel out one's ability to believe in oneself. . . . For Artaud, the threat is from the "self" as "other"; that is, the "self" can be taken over and destroyed by psychology, cliché and the commonplace; the "self" is pulverized by repressive authority, distorted "truths" and perverse assumptions. (271)

One may also think of the various directions among Lacanian approaches to a central rupture in the subject, some of which will come up later in this discussion, since such approaches are relatively well represented in Lynch

scholarship. Meindl's contribution here is the way in which he subtly but thoroughly infuses an inverted rendition of Bakhtin's central premise into Kayser's theory, and this move effectively transports Kayser's "aesthetic" approach to the grotesque into the "existential premise" on which Bakhtin's theory is based: Meindl thereby universalizes the Kayserian world of anxiety and horror by reconstituting it on an existential foundation (Meindl 18-19). In this way, to return to his initial characterization of the function of the concept, Meindl's grotesque emphasizes, like Kayser's, the "horror-provoking potential of the grotesque," but it equally thrives on the familiarity, universality, and ambiguity of the "nonrational dimension of life as such," which can be both "alluring and sinister, benign and devouring," etc. (15).[3] Thus, Meindl seems to be deepening the sense of the uncanny already present in Kayser's version of the theory by identifying his own revision as one that in some ways implicates the other concept, to which I now turn (Meindl 16).

III

In his discussion of Edgar Allan Poe's "The Fall of the House of Usher," Meindl lists the prototypical features of the uncanny: "Silence, solitude, darkness," but then he moves to more specific features of the uncanny in Poe's story: "recurrence, interchange between the animate and the inanimate, the

---

[3] As I noted in chapter II, Meindl's situation of the grotesque within Heideggerian metaphysics more thoroughly and beautifully frames his theory of the concept within existential philosophy (see Meindl, 28-35), but for the present purposes, I think teasing out his reliance on and mutual integration of Bakhtin's and Kayser's theories is enough to move the argument along.

mechanical aura of certain nervous diseases (epilepsy, for example), insanity, and double identities" (58). These latter features, Meindl observes, "are also typical of the grotesque" (58). Such features (and others) disclose a certain slippage in critical vocabulary—a possible overlap of concepts, and one that is central to the films of David Lynch. Andrew Bennett and Nicholas Royle, in their discussion of the uncanny in *Introduction to Literature, Criticism, and Theory,* invoke many of these same "forms that the uncanny takes," but they also broaden the term beyond Freud's psychoanalytic interrogation of the concept in his essay "The Uncanny" (37). They observe that the uncanny's function is "making things *uncertain*: it has to do with the sense that things are not as they have come to appear through habit and familiarity, that they may challenge all rationality and logic" (37 ital. orig.). While this conception of the term relieves it to some extent of its inscription within the psychoanalytic system, that is, as Steven Jay Schneider comments in an essay on *Eraserhead,* "via a return to consciousness of some previously repressed ideational content, or else via a reconfirmation in depicted reality of some previously 'surmounted' belief or beliefs," it may also be slightly theoretically vague, as David Punter and Glennis Byron seem to indicate in their book, *The Gothic* (Schneider 10; Punter and Byron 283-84). But Bennett and Royle's suggestion that the uncanny's challenge to rationality and logic—its fundamental sense of uncertainty—identifies it with Meindl's notion that the grotesque privileges and evokes the "nonrational dimension of life as such" (15).

Further, Schneider points to Noel Carroll's discussion of the uncanny in the latter's *Philosophy of Horror, or Paradoxes of the Heart* for a more specific outline of the uncanny. Carroll, Schneider remarks, "attributes feelings of horror and uncanniness to apparent transgressions or violations of existing cultural (in some cases, conceptual) categories," such as "mutually exclusive dyads 'me/not me, inside/outside, . . . living/dead, and human/machine'" (Schneider 10; Carroll 32). Carroll extends this notion later in his book in a discussion of the role of the uncanny in the overlap between horror and fantasy: the uncanny names the experience of knowing something that has been hidden but is at the same time familiar—the experience of something at "the limits of a culture's definitional scheme of what is": "The objects of horror, in my account, are impure," Carroll continues, "and this impurity is to be understood in terms of interstitiality, recombinative fusions of discrete categorical types, and so on" (176). Thus, for Carroll, horror and fantasy can evoke the uncanny because these genres strike viewers with images/ideas of what are often familiar objects that become "impure" because they transgress dominant boundaries (32, 175-76). Again, there is notable overlap here with central aspects of grotesque theory: both rely on tensions between conflicting/opposing poles in cultural consciousness; both thrive on the subversion of the pantheon of dominant cultural values/images; both reveal or point to a rupture in the self. So, what is the difference?

I will attempt in the rest of this essay to delineate the respective roles of the grotesque and the uncanny in Lynch's films and, by investigating the obliteration of the subject—both in terms of conceptual/ psychological

identity and in terms of corporeal being and, of course, their overlap. My running argument will suggest that the grotesque functions as a formal strategy in Lynch films toward something like an experience of the uncanny— that is, the two concepts, the grotesque and the uncanny, when they overlap in the various forms suggested above, do so to different ends, and this is why they can share the forms that they do. Uncanniness, then, is sometimes the effect of the grotesque's various formal or structural strategies of clashing contradictory images/concepts together in a way that allows the ambiguity and abnormality of their relationship within the image, but also within the overall structure or narrative of a film (or other work of art), to subsist, and often to subsist in excess of what would normally be expected, thus stressing or deepening the nonrational character of the numerous contradictory aspects associated with both terms. Turned another way, "uncanny" may describe one of the effects of the troubling recognition of the existential or universal aspects summoned up in the dark-oriented modern grotesque in the perceiver's response (Meindl 19), even if, or especially if, certain of the tropes associated with the grotesque draw out mixed responses. Such unresolved ambiguity in the relationship between incompatibles in the work and in the response thrives on the tensions between what is foreign and what is familiar—transforming them into cites of uncertainty, making what is normally "homely" (*heimlich*) "feel" "unhomely" (*unheimlich*) (Thomson 27; Punter and Byron 283).

IV

In his analysis of the roles of Sandy and Dorothy in *Blue Velvet* in his book, *David Lynch*, Michel Chion invokes what is probably the most widely used metaphor in Lynch studies: the Moebius strip:

> Sandy and Dorothy incarnate two sides of one figure, each side endlessly leading to the other as in a Moebius strip. Their worlds are divided according to a traditional scheme: the blonde is associated with conventional life and daytime whereas the brunette belongs to the night and a world of shady, fearful characters. (86)

Such doubling is everywhere in Lynch's films—both in terms of his frequent reliance on the "double," a typical strategy of characterization in literature and film associated with gothic, grotesque, uncanny, and horror as well as in a deeper, more thoroughgoing structural or conceptual sense, one that Slavoj Žižek calls the "ridiculous sublime" in his book, *The Art of the Ridiculous Sublime: On David Lynch's Lost Highway* (22). For Žižek, this phrase describes the tendency for

> the most ridiculously pathetic scenes (angels' apparitions at the end of *Fire Walk With Me* and *Wild at Heart*, the dream of the robins in *Blue Velvet*) . . . to be taken seriously. However. . . , one should also take seriously the ridiculously excessive violent "evil" figures (Frank in *Velvet*, Eddy in *Lost Highway*, Baron Harkonnen in *Dune*). (22)

After pointing out that this "enigma of the coincidence of opposites" (3) in Lynch's films is not sufficiently explained "along the lines of a Gnostic dualism," which effectively pushes each to one side of a cosmic continuum, Žižek suggests that what could be conceived as the "letting go" of "excessive phallic 'life power'" that Lynchian male characters enact in order to passively access "the subconscious maternal/feminine energy" with which they become who they are (the "sleeper awakens," to borrow a phrase from *Dune*), as seems evident in Paul's transformation in *Dune* and in Sailor's tender lovemaking in *Wild at Heart*, is undercut by its opposite but ultimately identical function to the contrary: Paul's "proto-totalitarian warrior leadership" and Sailor's quasi-erotic satisfaction after "letting himself go" when he brutally murders Bobby Ray Lemon in the first scene in *Wild at Heart* (complete, I add here, with a post-coital smoke) (22-23). Žižek concludes the chapter, "the point is precisely that one *cannot* simply oppose this violent 'subconscious' to the good one. . . . Doesn't Lynch's ultimate message reside therein, as in *Twin Peaks*, where Bob (Evil itself) is identical to the 'good' family father?" (23 ital. orig.). Žižek, here, points to the same notion as Chion but reads it at a deeper structural level: Lynch's Moebius strip bars simple dualisms in character construction as well as in broader thematic motifs that operate across or between his films. To spell his point out a bit more clearly, Žižek's claim is that for Lynch's characters (Sailor and Paul but also Diane in *Mulholland Dr.*, Jeffrey in *Blue Velvet*, and Fred in *Lost Highway*) to "let go"—to let their passion carry them—has mixed effects: such "letting go" allows his characters to be "truer" to their passions, perhaps, but

those passions lead to consequences that make simple dualistic psychoanalytic ascriptions untenable. In Lynch films there is always something lurking on the flipside of the strip that complicates, negates, or threatens a character's "positive" or "progressive" movement.

Punter and Byron point out similarly, relying on Robert Miles' work in the same vein, that the figure of the double, or *Doppelgänger*, in Gothic art and literature emphasizes the modern representation of the "self finding itself dispossessed in its own house, in a condition of rupture, disjunction, fragmentation" (Miles qtd. in Punter and Byron 40). But the construction of the double locates such anxiety within the subject—the alien double emerges from within (Punter and Byron 40). They go on to comment that "the real problem is not the existence of some more primitive and passionate internal self, but the force with which that self must be repressed in accordance with social conventions" (41). So, just as Žižek's analysis of Lynchian duality indicates, Punter and Byron agree that the double represents "not simply a split," which can easily be conceptually thrust to either side of a continuum of cultural values, social conventions, moral structures, etc.; the figure of the double has to do with "a more complex fragmentation of the subject" (41).

They also refer to the concept of the "abhuman" as related to the double, and their description bears obvious similarities to Carroll's discussion (above) of the uncanniness of the "impure" in horror (Carroll 176):

> The abhuman may be a body that retains traces of human
>
> identity but has become, or is in the process of becoming,
>
> something quite different. Alternatively, it may be some

indefinable "thing" that is mimicking the human, appropriating

the human form. Either way, it is the integrity of human

identity that is threatened; these are liminal bodies, occupying

the space between the terms of such oppositions as human and

beast, male and female, civilized and primitive. (Punter and

Byron 41)

In both cases, then, with the double and with the abhuman, the obliterating

effect of multiplying the subject—of finding an other in the self or of finding

the self in an other—has certain potential for engaging the grotesque in its

representation. Ambiguously bringing together opposing identities/bodies in

especially disconcerting ways that invite both some degree of familiarity with

the fusion and an alienating sense of distance or repulsion aligns these

theories with a thumbnail sketch of the formal structure and function of the

grotesque. Further, it is perhaps the degree to which one identifies with the

familiar here that influences the degree to which the perceiver experiences the

uncanny in response.

V

Doubles abound in Lynch's work. On one level, Lynch constructs

doubles that appeal to the same sorts of formal or structural strategies at work

in the grotesque but ultimately seem more suitably described along the lines

of Gothic uncanny. Among these are double identities constructed by

doubling people whose outward appearances fall in line with current trends of

attractiveness for their gender with other "attractive" people (and frequently

Lynch uses the same actor for each). Examples of these kinds of character

pairings include Laura and her cousin Madeline from *Twin Peaks*, Renee and

Alice and Fred and Pete in *Lost Highway*, Betty and Diane and Rita and

Camilla in *Mulholland Dr.*, and Nikki and Susan in *Inland Empire*. While

these pairings may reach into the grotesque at certain points—the similarly

weird murders of Laura and Madeline by Leland, as evidenced in the TV

series and in the film; the dismemberment and reconstitution of Renee into

Alice, as well as the brief scene in which her face is replaced with the Mystery

Man's in *Lost Highway*; Fred's warped and distorted head and face as he

seems to undergo the beginnings of a second transformation at the end of

Lost Highway (deformations that Pete seems to bear some vague semblance

of when he first enters the film with a protuberance on his forehead); Betty's

confrontation with her own jelly-faced corpse (Diane) in *Mulholland Dr.*; and

Susan's absurdly drawn out death scene and her defeat of the Phantom at the

end of *Inland Empire*—for the most part, if there is deep-seated grotesquery

among these doubles it is a moral one, which, while it may fail to fit within the

grotesque's notably physical character, does cohere with the "metaphysics of

the grotesque" that Meindl theorizes. Interestingly, though, many of these sets

of doubles function as an inversion of the way the figure of the double

conventionally works.

    As Punter and Byron's analysis of doubles, which they extrapolate from

Stevenson's *Dr. Jeckyll and Mr. Hyde* and Wilde's *The Picture of Dorian*

Gray, reveals, the double represents a "more primitive and passionate

internal self" that needs to be re/suppressed so that their civilized counterpart

can maintain an appearance that upholds an adherence to societal

conventions (41). But Lynch's doubles are frequently constructed through

fantasies by characters whose primitive passions have overtaken them and

driven them to commit foul deeds, for which their doubles serve as temporary

denouements. Or, put in the Lacanian terms through which Todd McGowan

interprets Lynch's films in *The Impossible David Lynch*:

> fantasy as such emerges in order to cover up a real gap [that is
>
> signaled by desire] within ideology or the symbolic order. Lacan
>
> uses the term "real" as a third category of experience (in
>
> addition to the imaginary and symbolic) to indicate the
>
> incompleteness of the symbolic structure, its failure to
>
> constitute itself as a coherent whole. Ideology uses fantasy to
>
> shore up its point of greatest weakness—the point at which its
>
> explanations of social phenomena break down [leaving
>
> unsatisfiable desire in the wake of the subject's inscription
>
> within the symbolic]—and this injects a potential radicality into
>
> every fantasy. (10)

This "radicality" McGowan refers to is the bleeding through of the Lacanian

"real" into fantasy as the "traumatic moment enacted within the fantasy" once

it has fully played out (22). Interestingly, many of these moments of rupture

are those in which Lynch appeals to the grotesque, as in Betty's confrontation

with her own (Diane's) decomposing corpse, whose jellied face at this point

has some resemblance to that of the molded or burned face of the Bum who

seems to control her fantasy, or in her disconcerting experience at Club

Silencio, which produces the glimpses through the bald falsity of the affecting

performance there that kills the fantasy, not only of the impassioned singer

and song at the center of this sequence, but also of the passionate mutual love

between the Betty and her amnesiac friend. Or in *Inland Empire's* finale,

when Nikki/Susan finds and kills the mysterious Phantom, her face distorts,

seems to melt, and then becomes a smeared, dirty inanimate mask, which

then merges with the Phantom's own visage in a disturbing utilization of the

shot/reverse shot technique.

Other of Lynch's doubles in *The Elephant Man, Blue Velvet, Twin*

Peaks, Wild at Heart, and *Twin Peaks: Fire Walk with Me,* rely more

thoroughly on the grotesque to produce uncanny effects that are as haunting

as the more Gothic variations in the absence of corporeal distortion and/or

deformation. But these grotesque doublings bring with them an unnerving

recognition or familiarity that works on a different level. In his book, *David*

Lynch: Beautiful Dark, Greg Olson discusses doublings in Lynch's films and

draws out similar functions between the pairings of Treves and Bytes in *The*

Elephant Man, Bob and Leland in *Twin Peaks* and *Twin Peaks: Fire Walk*

with Me, and Jeffrey and Frank in *Blue Velvet* (123-24). He draws attention to

the ways in which the doubling of a character who sees himself as "good" and

"innocent" with a "malevolent cinematic force" impinges a troubling sense of

familiarity with the "bad" other onto the "good" character (124). This

recognition of the other in the self is particularly troubling, as when at pivotal

points in *The Elephant Man* and *Blue Velvet,* Bytes and Frank accuse Treves

and Jeffrey of being "like me." It is troubling because, at least to some degree, it is obviously true: Treves, like Bytes before him, is accused of "freak hunting" on a number of occasions (and not just by Bytes), which forces him to question whether or not he is a "good man" (and Lynch cuts away before his interlocutor can answer); Jeffrey not only shares a woman with Frank, but begins to share in the latter's violent erotic style. One could also interpret Lula and Marietta as doubles of one another in *Wild at Heart*. Lula invertedly identifies with her mother in her attempts not to be like her and in her repressions of the murderous associations her mother draws out in her mind, and vice versa in Marietta's case: she overinvests her own identity in Lula's, which leads to her attempts to possess and control Lula and make love to and murder Sailor, Lula's lover.

Twin Peaks' and *Fire Walk with Me's* Bob as double for Leland (and, later in the series, for Cooper) invites another avenue of interpretation more centrally located within the conventions of the grotesque precisely because Bob, as a character, is a particularly grotesque one. Whereas Bytes is reminiscent of the grotesque of a Dickensian variety and is certainly not someone with whom Treves wants to identify, Bob, Frank, and, to some extent Marietta, function on a wholly different level.[4] Bob, as an "evil,

---

[4] Marietta is revealed as grotesque throughout the course of the film—as a murderous, conniving drunk, who almost seems a grotesque parody of the cliché "overprotective mother," and that seems to be how Lula sees her: "My mother just loves me too much," she says as an explanation for Marietta's attempts to keep her away from Sailor. But her most grotesque appearances in the film occur when she is alone—many of the martini-glass-in-hand drunk scenes in which she is visibly frazzled and almost cartoonishly out of sorts, and particularly the one in which she vomits after lipsticking her face

extradimensional entity" (more on this aspect later) that craves the dark

pleasures of "punishing sex and torturous death," as Olson puts it, bears

certain resemblance to Frank, who shares similar appetites. And while both

characters are imaged and acted in their respective roles as frightening, there

is also an exaggerated sense of ridiculousness to them that makes the very real

threats that they represent all the more unnerving because of its excessively

physical clownishness. Lynch's camera frequently captures both characters in

wide angle close-ups, head on, which allows the actors to render the scary

ridiculousness of the characters in abnormally physical gestures and facial

manipulations, such as Frank's frequent bouts of exaggerated gas-huffing and

his wide-eyed glares and Bob's facial ticks, knowing smiles, ogling eyes, all

---

completely red and symbolically cutting her wrists with the makeup—and thus hide away the far reaches of her insanity (?) from Lula, which keeps Lula's anxieties about seeing herself in Marietta at a relatively low level of grotesquery, even if they are more pronounced for the viewer.

Lynch's short film *The Grandmother* also relies on markedly grotesque depictions of human beings: the mother and father figures are appetitive, atavistic creatures, who spend almost as much time on screen emulating dogs (initially, on their hands and knees barking, yelping, and whining at each other and at their son) as they do acting like human beings (a role for which they still seem to rely on appetitive and aggressive behavior, which is complemented with the intermittent sound of dog vocalizations in the sound design). The Grandmother herself is also a notably grotesque figure. She is born onto a bed in an upstairs room from an enormous seed pod planted and tended by the boy, who serves as midwife to her birth from the pod, pulling her fully grown, fully clothed (shoes and all) body from the oozing canal of the plant. If there is a set of doubles here, it is the Mother and the Grandmother—each depicting opposite versions of femininity and maternity, but the film's overall surrealist aesthetics paints both sides as grotesque. The Mother is slender and pretty, while the Grandmother is portly and wizened. Further, the Grandmother's affectionate, loving treatment of the boy is juxtaposed with scenes in which the Mother stands by or laughs at the Father's abuse of the Boy or another in which she forcibly attempts to show her affection by violently grasping at him as he tries to escape her clutches. If they serve as doubles, then they do so as surrealistically stylized polar oppositions in the Boy's (and the spectator's) experience of maternal figures.

prominent features in the many mirror scenes in which he figures. Sound is another venue for the weird threat of these characters to emerge, as in Frank's orgasmic wheezing with the gas mask, his creepy whispers, and silently lip-synched singing and their contrast with his "normal" yell of a speaking voice, and in Bob's lascivious giggles and murmurs, which contrast with his violently physical deeds and primitive sexual roars. To recognize oneself or find familiarity in these grotesquely rendered doubles, as do Leland (and later even Agent Cooper) and Jeffrey, is to come undone, and Lynch gives us images of this as well: Consider Jeffrey's breakdown in his bedroom and the mingled sense of repulsion and obligation he seems to feel towards Dorothy near the end of *Blue Velvet* after Frank has broken her too, or Leland's complete emotional and existential obliteration after several episodes of finding pleasure (singing and dancing, even during the acts of murdering his niece and attempting to murder Donna) in his unification with Bob. In both scenarios, the uncanny recognition of the self in the grotesquely other and vice versa, culminates in varying degrees of what Olson refers to as "the terror of depersonalization," a complex sundering within the self (115).

Among Lynch's numerous doubles, one particular set stands out, which bridges the discussions of the double and the abhuman (to come in the next part of the argument), and this is the doubling of Merrick in *The Elephant Man* with himself. Lynch describes Merrick as "what kept me going" on the project: "He was a strange, wonderful, innocent guy. That was it. That's what the whole thing's about" (qtd. in Rodley 103). It is in terms of this "wonderful" contrast, the contrast between the outside (the "strange") and the inside (the

"innocent"), that Merrick can function as his own double. The film presents Merrick's body as monstrously strange (even as it depicts him as an affable, intelligent man), and much has been made of the, possibly exploitative, structural strategy of delaying the audience's visual gratification of regarding him, as Joe Kember, relying on Eisenstein, points out in "David Lynch and the Mug Shot: Facework in *The Elephant Man* and *The Straight Story*": "Merrick's face is a fascination of the eye, inviting strategies of shock, defamiliarization and distanciation among the film's spectators" (25). Merrick as an "attraction," Kember states, is necessarily married to the "principle of objectification, which Lynch arguably exploits as much as his predecessors" (24). Merrick's body, in a certain sense, is his double, but, again, his doubling externalizes his physically ghastly and monstrous deformations, as do the doublings of Diane in *Mulholland Dr.* and Fred in *Lost Highway,* but in a way that morally or metaphysically aligns with theories of the grotesque rather than one that is predicated upon physicality. But unlike those characters, Merrick has to take his external presence with him when he lives out his fantasy as a Victorian dandy, as a "normal" person. And as is demonstrated in the scene in which the night porter exploits and abuses Merrick, ultimately forcing him to look at his own reflection in a mirror, he regards his own deformed physicality with the horror of uncanny recognition: he screams just like everyone else does when they first encounter him, further verification that within he is "like everyone else" and that it is the burden of his own excessive flesh that keeps his fantasy from being complete.

Further, Lynch demonstrates this rift between the inside and outside, between the "normal" and the "monstrous" by appealing to the uncanny effects of the grotesque through the reactions of members of society high and low who cannot help but relate to Merrick as their social position seems to suggest they ought to relate to a freak (at least insofar as the film represents this). The scenes that revolve around images of Merrick's troubling form in fancy clothes, in a "homely" Victorian flat, or with his cigarette holder, perfumes, and hairbrush, talking romantically to a framed picture of a famous actress, are some of the most uncomfortable and contrastive moments of grotesquery in the film, and they intensify the rupturing doubling at work in Merrick's character. As McGowan observes, Merrick "has sustained the fantasy of becoming a normal subject, and when the film ends, he achieves this fantasy as he lies down to sleep the way that everyone else does" (65). McGowan continues by, again, reminding the reader that fantasy (as Lacan understands it) provides a traumatic kernel of the real: in this case that the steep price of such "fantasy leaves us no possibility for claiming that this is not what we want" (65). In the end, for Merrick to fulfill his fantasy and slake his desire, he must kill his double, a notion Lynch also experiments with in different ways in the cases Jeffrey, Paul, Diane/Betty, and Nikki/Susan.

In a discussion of *The Elephant Man*'s sound design, Chion refers to coalescence of the sounds of the thuds, hisses, and whistles of industry that evoke an aura of the London of the Industrial Revolution and "Merrick's laboured, asthmatic, terrorized breathing . . . , as if there were a continuum between the sensation (conveyed primarily by the sound) of this worn,

suffering bodily machinery and the film's rendering of industry" (49). Such juxtaposition is apparently intentional, as Lynch's comments on the film denote:

> [The] pictures of explosions—big explosions—they always reminded me of these papillomatous growths on John Merrick's body. They were like slow explosions. . . . So the idea of these smokestacks and soot and industry next to his flesh was also a thing that got me going. (qtd. in Rodley 103)

Lynch continues this line of thought as he shifts to a reflection on the human body in general:

> Human beings are like little factories. They turn out so many little products. The idea of something growing inside, and all these fluids, and timings and changes, and all these chemicals somehow capturing life, and coming out and splitting off and turning into another thing . . . it's unbelievable. (qtd. in Rodley 103)

I do not think it is stretching too far to draw the conclusion from these remarks and from the structure of the film itself that the excesses of Merrick's body are analogous to the excesses of industrial energies released in the factory explosions and the channeling of pollutants, steam, and noise that Lynch refers to here and that find places in the montages of Merrick's troubled birth and of life in London. He functions as a kind of human harbinger of the threat of such excess: his "little factory" has over-produced; his body's "timings and changes" are out of sync; his body continues to

produce life, but that life fails to split off and never becomes another thing

and thus threatens and ruins his life. In a way, his haunting figure functions

as the human epitome of the excesses of industrial power. He is Victorian

London's double: diegetically, as a "freak" or a medical anomaly, he

fascinates, challenges, and threatens the identities of spectators by the mere

fact of his humanity, and as an individual subject, his "normal" character

within fascinates, challenges, and threatens even more so because, in

domestic contexts, his spectators are not afforded their comforting distance

from the evidence of his mannered gentility because the context has shifted.

Extradiegetically, Merrick functions as the human double of London's

industrial excess and danger. In either stance, then, Merrick's presence evokes

the abhuman.[5] His is a multivalent, metamorphic body (Punter and Byron 41).

Insofar as he functions as a human subject (an identity he is forced to

proclaim to an angry mob amidst the public toilets late in the film) in a body

that seems to have "become, or is in the process of becoming, something quite

---

[5] As Punter and Byron observe, "The majority of these abhuman bodies are the product not of supernatural forces but of scientifically explainable processes, and it is the scientist who becomes the pre-eminent figure in the Gothic fiction of the period," that is, the late 1800s (41). They go on to note, "Fears about the integrity of the self are forcefully articulated at this time through the emergence of what some critics call 'Darwinian Gothic'" (42). I am using the concept of the abhuman in this chapter to capture the term's connection to liminal bodies "in the process of becoming" something else and/or as the indefinable "other" appropriating or mimicking the human form—either of which contains an implicit threat to human subjectivity and threatens conventional boundaries, forms, and certainties with the dissolution, ultimately, "of the human subject itself," as the Gothic moves into the Modernist world (Punter and Byron (41-43). I will be using the abhuman in this more modernistic context: Lynch's work has some overlap with scientific knowledge, Darwinian thought, and the like, but his films integrate these themes within a complex of ideas that also invite speculation concerning metaphysics, psychology/psychoanalysis, etc.

different," he calls into question the distinction between man and beast

("elephant man") or even invites speculation about the disintegration of the

subject from the outside in, a rupture that threatens to divide and obliterate

the self through the "slow explosion" of the body (Punter and Byron 41; Lynch

qtd. in Rodley 103). And insofar as his body functions as a troubling epitome

of industrial London—that is, as a "depersonalized," deformed, exploding

human body that emits excessive noise—he fills the role of something

indefinable (a dangerous overabundance of energy or being, and a corporeal

metaphor thereof?) that threatens human identity by "appropriating the

human form" (41).

VI

Eraserhead demonstrates an inversion of *The Elephant Man*'s

approach to an abhuman figure. *The Elephant Man*'s melodramatic approach

to Merrick's plight as mistreated and misunderstood gentle monster garners

audience sympathies by supplying kind characters for audiences to identify

with like Treves, his wife, and Mrs. Kendall (and others who warm to Merrick)

over against the more baldly exploitative characters of the likes of Bytes and

the night porter. But, while there are glimpses of what may be pity (in Treves'

shedding of a tear at first beholding Merrick), Merrick is exploited as monster

(even by Treves) until he proves his humanity through speaking, learning, and

getting on with others socially. In *Eraserhead*, the figure of the "baby" enters

the film's world as a horrible little "thing" that is not recognizably human to

the audience (it resembles a large skinned rabbit with its ears and limbs

severed, which is wrapped in gauze to prevent its insides coming out) but

which is named as "human" (though "premature") and is treated by Henry

and Mary as a human infant (Mary spoons it baby food; Henry gives it a

fatherly "aw shucks" look when he enters the apartment in the scene where

the baby makes its first appearance). And indeed the baby's behavior

(resisting food, crying at night) has resemblances with those of human

infants, but along with these come the mocking, sneering laughter at Henry's

romantic failure with the woman who lives across the hall, its shifty eyes, and

ghastly sores. This reversal of the more melodramatic approach to Merrick

invites not pity, empathy, or sympathy, but because Lynch "intentionally

primes only to violate" (the film announces a baby in order to repulse the

viewer with its image of the "baby"), as Schneider observes, the director, with

this figure and in other aspects of the film, invokes the familiar in order to

disgust (11, 8).

Ken Kaleta, in his book, *David Lynch*, remarks that "*Eraserhead* is a

film pervaded by a feeling of unreasonable horror" (22). It tracks Henry

through the familiar narrative of a rocky relationship with a woman who gets

pregnant, which forces new roles and responsibilities (and stresses) on the

adults of the relationship, and then things begin to get worse and worse, and

the child is the one who suffers most. Put this way, the film seems like a soap

opera, and, to some degree, its plot overlaps with such melodramatic day-time

television fare. And this is instrumental in establishing *Eraserhead's*

"unreasonable horror," its uncanniness: because in relating a commonplace

melodrama, *Eraserhead* backgrounds the beginnings of life as the result of the workings "in some cosmic control room" and supplies an epilogue in Henry's travel "after death to the galaxy behind [his] radiator," taking every opportunity along the way to bury his audience in its "avalanche of repugnant images" (Kaleta 18-19). Thus, *Eraserhead*'s is a world conducive to uncanny grotesquery in its play with abhuman figures even though at its core it is a soap opera story. And just as the melodramatic narrative (the soap opera) at its center is exploded and undermined through the use of grotesque images and thematic figures that are shot for the full hyperbolic effect of their contrast with the commonplace, so Henry, the film's protagonist, who evokes the despairing stoic deliberateness of Buster Keaton or of some character out of Beckett, is decapitated, his head replaced by the phallic head of the parasitic "baby" from within him. Whether this scene within the radiator world represents some metaphysical occurrence or Henry's nightmare vision about bearing the "baby's" burden, the abhuman image functions all the same: the baby threatens Henry's human identity, his happiness, and kills his potential to grow or change (as signified in the inclusion of bleeding tree in the *mise en scene* of this sequence).[6] The eraser factory scene that follows

---

[6] This threat is objectified to some degree when Henry steps into the hallway and sees the neighbor, with whom he had shared his bed, with another man. In another example of Lynch's play with the shot-reverse shot technique, the spectator first sees Henry peeking out his door; then the camera shifts to his perspective, depicting the woman and her new man, which shifts then to her perspective of Henry, and in this shot, Henry's head has been replaced by the "baby's." Lynch finishes the short sequence with another perspective shot from Henry's point of view to capture the disgusted look on the woman's face before she disappears through the door to her apartment.

perpetuates the grotesque depersonalization of Henry's character (a drilled-out sample of his head is machined into erasers for pencils), but its upshot allows Henry the moral/metaphysical context in which he can "erase" the baby as well as the troubling world outside the radiator.

The concept of the abhuman can also facilitate the interpretation of the characters in Lynch's films who seem to exist on some metaphysical, mystical plane beyond "real world" reality but who make appearances in or influence that reality in some way. Characters such as *Eraserhead*'s Man in the Planet and Lady in the Radiator; *Twin Peaks'* and *Fire Walk with Me*'s Bob, Mike/Gerard, and other Red Room inhabitants; *Lost Highway*'s Mystery Man; and *Mulholland Dr.*'s Cowboy, Bum, and size-shifting elderly couple all present a certain sense of hope, confusion, threat, or help to other characters in the films in which they figure. They seem at certain points in Lynch's films to be the constructs of characters' fantasies, wish fulfillments, externalized or metastasized embodiments of forces from deep within the mind (superego, libido, death drive, etc.), and at other times (and indeed sometimes simultaneously), they seem to function as incomprehensible "others," "shadows" to whom the "normal" rules of human existence seem not to apply, a power which they can at times lend to others through themselves or put to use for their own malevolent purposes.

While *Eraserhead* appeals to many horror conventions, as Schneider demonstrates, the film appropriates such aspects the of horror genre into a dynamic context that also relies on melodramatic, surrealistic, and absurdist techniques (5). As Lynch's career moves forward to *The Elephant Man*, one

can still recognize aspects of these genres and aesthetics, but melodrama and

horror have taken precedence, or, put more precisely, *The Elephant Man*

relates melodrama through the images of horror. But, in many ways, the

horror aesthetic lightens as Lynch's career comes into its own from *Blue*

Velvet forward. The abhuman figures in these films more precisely reflect

Gothic aesthetics than those of horror, a distinction to which Kelly Hurley

refers in an essay in *The Cambridge Companion to Gothic Fiction*, observing

that "horror is generally understood to be a less restrained, more tasteless

genre than Gothic, indulging in more graphic imagery and extreme scenarios

as it depicts decomposing, deliquescing, and otherwise disgustingly

metamorphic bodies" (192-93).[7] The metaphysical characters in his later films

reflect similar positions to those in films like *Eraserhead* (the Man in the

Planet and the Lady in the Radiator), and they reflect, also like these earlier

manifestations, subtler approaches to evoking the uncanny through

employing the grotesque in the films' presentations of abhuman characters.

This is not to say that Lynch's tastes for depicting bodies emitting matter,

being dismembered, decapitated, etc. have changed—they certainly have not.

The point is that those aspects in the more recent body of films are integrated

---

[7] Ultimately, Hurley undermines this distinction between horror and Gothic by embracing a much broader definition of Gothic literature that would encompass horror as well: "[W]e understand Gothic as a genre that reemerges at different historical moments and is designed to explore and manage 'the taboo areas of a particular culture,'" but its "plots remain exorbitant . . . , its settings are still overcharged with a fearsome and foreboding atmosphere," and it "still shows a fascination with extreme behaviors and derangements of human subjectivity. The genre is about excess" (193-94). The distinction, I think, still points to the shifts in Lynch's use of images that I discuss in the rest of the paragraph.

more realistically into the diegetic frame, which pronounces the weirdness, the otherness, of the presence of what I have been calling his "metaphysical" characters. And this is one way in which these characters function as uncanny, for as Freud remarks in his essay on the concept, the writer evokes the uncanny if he

> has to all appearances taken up his stance on the ground of common reality. By doing so he adopts all the conditions that apply to the emergence of a sense of the uncanny in normal experience; . . . But the writer can intensify and multiply this effect far beyond what is feasible in normal experience; in his stories he can make things happen that one would never, or only rarely, experience in real life. . . . [H]e tricks us by promising us everyday reality and then going beyond it. ("The Uncanny" 156-57)

Lynch does Freud one better: his "everyday reality" is frequently hermetically "normal"—shiny, bright, hopeful (consider the ways in which Lynch establishes the "normal" worlds of *Blue Velvet, Twin Peaks,* or even the first thirty minutes with Betty in *Mulholland Dr.*)—which allows his transgressions of the "normal" to be particularly affecting. And even in *Wild at Heart* or *Lost Highway*, Lynch establishes an "everyday reality" that is grounded in a grotesque or grim realism (respectively), which he then also transgresses, though to different ends, in order to provide a shock that is hard for the viewer to prepare for. Lynch's "metaphysical" characters emerge with the transgression. They help provide the shock.

Beginning with *Eraserhead*'s Man in the Planet and the Lady in the

Radiator, Lynch's metaphysical characters are associated with duality, the

values or associations of which are difficult to decipher. They are connected

with life in the "real" world, but they stand within and without at once. The

Man in the Planet pulls the levers that seem to move life into being, and it is

his disturbed face that reappears when the "baby" is wiped out, while the Lady

in the Radiator engages in the death dance that squishes life out of the sperm-

like creatures the Man in the Planet metaphysically thrusts into the world

with his levers and machines. And yet the bodies of these two entities seem to

contrast with their metaphysical vocations. The Man in the Planet's body is

covered with sores or burns; his movements are jerky, machine-like; his

countenance is disturbingly stern (and also covered in sores). The Lady in the

Radiator's appearance is one that evokes purity, innocence, virginal

femininity, as signified in her 1950s blonde hairdo, her unceasing smile

(emphasized by the enormously puffy prosthetic cheeks), girlish dance steps,

and gestures of invitation (which center around her breasts/heart). In

contrast to Henry's neurotic wife as well as to the seductive brunette who lives

across the hall, the Lady in the Radiator brings associations of the ideal

virgin/mother, whose love is comfortingly nonsexual. Both she and the Man

in the Planet resemble humanity, but they are marked as "other" by their

bodies and positions within the world of the film. Their connection with

Henry's "real" world is ambiguous but certain. Is the Man in the Planet some

ill-formed demiurge responsible for creating life in his image? The X family's

involuntary seizures, the "baby's" sores, and the over-industrialized cityscape

all point to images associated with the brief glimpses Lynch gives of him. Does

the Lady in the Radiator represent the warm embrace of death, escape from

the Henry's miserable fate in such a world? Or is the image of the radiator (its

pipes locking the Lady within) an inverted metaphor? Is the life within the

radiator world the fullness of life? Is it Henry who is locked out from this

fullness? Is his murder of his "baby" necessary for entry because it entails

killing the part of himself by which he is connected to the life produced by the

Man in the Planet (this may explain the cataclysm that surrounds the death of

the baby as a kind of personal apocalypse)? None of this is clear. What is clear

is that these two metaphysical characters exist on a plane of existence behind,

within, around the "real" one: they are "other" and their deformations inscribe

their otherness into the bodies of their characters. In a way, their threat is

similar to the one represented in Lynch's other characters from beyond or

behind reality.

In *Blue Velvet*, after his initial observation of Frank with Dorothy,

Jeffrey asks the unanswerable question of Sandy: "Why are there people like

Frank in the world?" And this is a question the film never attempts to answer

in its construction of its two sides of aestheticized American fantasy, the

dream and the nightmare (McGowan 91). But if the question is not answered

in Lynch's later films, he at least seems to entertain it, and the context for

asking such a question leads Lynch back into the arena of *Eraserhead*'s

metaphysical features. *Twin Peaks, Fire Walk with Me, Lost Highway*, and

Mulholland Dr. all experiment with figures that lurk in the shadows of reality,

influencing what people can know and do in the world—backgrounding good

and evil with the mixed realities of abhuman characters who take various human forms, but who, again, seem to exist on a plane of existence different from but related to Lynch's "real" worlds.

In the world of *Twin Peaks*, the metaphysical realm is associated with what the series calls the Black Lodge and White Lodge, which may be the variations on the binary of good and evil—indeed variations on any number of binaries of value, proportion, behavior, emotion, etc., which Cooper discovers (along with a few others) in his dreams, visions, and entrance into Red Room in the series' final episode—and so the two lodges may ultimately be the one dynamic place. The multiplicity of subjectivity in this place, some of which bleeds over into the "real" world of Twin Peaks, is one of its dominant features. Most of the characters associated with the Red Room exhibit bodies that traverse any number of variations of the binaries associated with human beings. There is a dancing dwarf, a sluggish giant, a one-armed man, the atavistic Bob; then there are also those from among the living and the dead of human reality who appear in the Red Room. Some of the metaphysical figures bodily traverse the boundary between the Red Room and the human world, while also appearing in visions or dreams (Bob, Gerard/Mike, the Grandmother and Grandson). Others (the Giant and the Man from Another Place) seem not to leave the Red Room, though the Giant appears to Cooper in visions from there.

As "indefinable" beings that "mimic the human" by "appropriating the human form" these characters may be described as abhuman. Further, these characters inhabit bodies at the extremes of human corporeality, an aspect of

their reality that relies on elements of grotesque extremes of contrast to reflect a certain balance or middling of reality that may be inferred among them: the giant and the dwarf, Mike/Gerard and Bob, the aged woman and the young boy. Further, some of these characters appear (most prominently in episode 29) in doubles of themselves, as the Man from Another Place and the Giant at one moment appear weird but friendly and the next as insanely evil (an aspect that carries over to shadow selves of Laura and Cooper). This extends further when the Man from Another Place and the Giant are revealed to be doubles or shadows of one another (as the Giant says as he sits down with the dwarf, "One and the same")—extending the multiplicity of their subjectivity beyond the bounds of their bodies. McGowan argues, again relying on Lacanian psychoanalytic theory, that the Man from Another Place, Mike/Gerard, and Bob are embodied representations of facets of the unconscious, concluding that they are both unified and divided against one another in an eternal struggle over possession and enjoyment, presence and absence, death drive and libido (144-49). While McGowan makes an interesting argument, the Lodge seems to supercede the unconscious as such, but McGowan's extension of the identities of these characters as both unified and severed provides yet another threat to subjectivity as such. All of the metaphysical Red Room occupants seem to merge, overlap, and converge, but, just as much, they occupy separate bodies (extreme bodies: excessive, diminutive, old, young, partial, beautiful, ghastly), and oppositional, conflicting identities: they are one and many at once, as the grotesque image of Mike/Gerard and the Man from Another Place figures visually when, in *Fire Walk with Me*, Mike/Gerard

is seated in the Red Room, the dwarf at his side, where his missing arm should be ("Do you know who I am? I am the arm and I sound like this: wa wa wa wa"). One gets the sense that each of these characters fits with the others in some fashion or at some point in the Lodge's time to present some metaphysical unity just as assuredly as their severance from one another ruptures that unity, leaving some grave wound that transcends worlds.

Not only do these multiplied metaphysical subjects threaten the concept of human identity merely in their corporeal existence in human bodies as identities that merge and separate and cooperate and conflict according to some otherworldly rhythm, but these metaphysical machinations are intimately connected with goings on in the "normal" human existence of Twin Peaks. These figures are responsible for, or related to, at least some of the acts of good and evil in the "real" world, and they feed on the extremes of human emotion, at human subjectivity pressed to the brink. Whatever the specifics of their connection to life in Twin Peaks (or the rest of the world), they influence what happens there; some live in the city; some speak to or through townspeople or inanimate objects; some inhabit its citizens and engage in evil with or through them. Not only does the uncanny world of *Twin Peaks/Fire Walk with Me* threaten human identity with respect to the degree to which the beastly animal is still alive in the civilized person (in a psychoanalytic variation of Darwinian Gothic), for example, but it also shows that such beastly impulses are precisely the flip side of the strip, that one is not separate from the other, and that, somewhere, behind or within whatever it is that makes up the world, those two conflicting aspects (and many others)

that struggle within the human subject emerge from an otherness that impinges itself on the human world, influencing people and events there, even as it withholds its secrets.

The same sense of mystery and threat pervades the metaphysical characters in *Lost Highway* and *Mulholland Dr.* The figures of the Mystery Man, the Cowboy, and the Bum (and his cartoonish, size-shifting elderly henchmen) all appear in concrete human form but all are associated with an otherness that makes their positions within their stories transgress the borders between the physical and the metaphysical, the worldly and the otherworldly, the possible and the impossible. The physical presence of Mystery Man and the Cowboy defies rational explanation: the Mystery Man can be two places at once, can appear and disappear at will, can enact a transferal of one man's subjectivity to another's and back again; the Cowboy can control the fate of a young director, just as he can control the electricity in a rodeo ring by his mere presence, and he can "wake up" a dead girl as he facilitates the reversal of time and the fading of a fantasy. Both characters also occupy bodies whose features seem to break down distinctions between genders: the Cowboy and the Mystery Man have hairless faces with feminine features, the latter's even bearing white powder makeup and deep red lipstick. While the Cowboy appears in the garb his name suggests (which in the history of film is usually a signifier of the tough, rugged masculinity evoked in numberless westerns), he speaks with a high, soft, effeminate drawl. Similarly contrastive is the image of the Mystery Man as an ill-tempered, paunchy, middle aged hermaphrodite documenteur (or else as a character stolen from a

Robert Wilson play) and the brutality he evokes in his threatening speech and actions on even the most menacing "real world" character in the film (Mr. Eddy/Dick Laurent). Lynch in these characters invokes and transgresses traditional distinctions between male and female and mixes associations with each to intensify the otherness these characters represent. And this otherness reaches a whole new level in the figure of the Bum, whose presence in *Mulholland Dr.* seems to be strictly confined to representing a dangerous, mysterious presence that is nearly impenetrable (as is visually represented in obfuscation of his face by burns, mold, or grime and in his vagrant occupation of the "real world's" non-places) but that is ultimately behind the trouble at the center of the film.

Olson and McGowan argue convincingly that *Lost Highway* and *Mulholland Dr.* revolve around the dreams/fantasies that Fred and Diane construct for themselves in order to escape their despairing troubles, their guilt or desire, and their own subjectivities (Olson 437, 532; McGowan 164, 195-96). This argument entails that the "metaphysical" characters operate within the fantasies and so are not "real" in an objective sense; they are constructs within the fantasies. But Lynch, never being the kind of director that makes such conclusions easy ones to arrive at, does not supply the clues on which such interpretations are based until well into the films, after establishing the characters and their drama and relationships and throwing in these weirdly "other" metaphysical characters as well. Further, such conclusions require the interpreter to bridge the narrative gaps and structural distortions that have become characteristic Lynchian qualities: Lynch does

not disclose that "by the way, this was all a fantasy." He simply breaks the narrative: Fred's cell is now occupied by Pete, who does not know how he got there, and his parents refuse to discuss it, indicating only that the Mystery Man was involved; Rita disappears, and Betty wakes up as Diane, whose relationship with Camilla (who looks like Rita) has apparently fallen apart, and it all has something to do with a Bum and a mysterious box. If some of what we see is fantasy, it is we as interpreters of the films who have to make the judgment. And in the case of *Inland Empire*, Lynch's experimental nonnarrative approach goes even further, inviting Olson to defer to Lynch's belief in reincarnation and Hindu spirituality to attempt to make sense of the three hours of doublings within doublings and fantasies and dreams within and around one another—of characters interrupting other character's scenes (sometimes their own) because they have been or will be invoked through another character's narrative (which somehow makes them "real," brings them to life) or through some vague but powerful creative fiat (672-73).

Whether one finds these arguments convincing, though, for my present purposes, does not really matter because, whether the metaphysical characters "really" exist or not, or whether Fred can "really" turn into Pete or Diane into Betty, etc—none of these things matter for this argument. In fact, Lynch's tendency to intensify the ambiguous and paradoxical aspects of his films through experimentation with plot and narrative, camera work (blurring, metonymic close-ups, editing, etc.), or the inclusion and depiction of characters who seem both human and not (with whose bodies, faces, speech, and action he subtly subverts conventional delineations of human

identity)—whether "real" or fantasy—these aspects converge to demonstrate the obliteration of the individual human subject (Jerslev 152-53). Moreover, the argument that some of these abhuman metaphysical forces represent externalized facets of the unconscious, as McGowan argues, may be the most disturbing rupture of selfhood yet (162). This argument effectively explodes the subject: its unconscious is spilling out, becoming "other" identities, multiplying the subject beyond the double (Fred as Pete but also as Mystery Man; Diane as Betty but also as the Cowboy and the Bum), doubling reality itself. Distinctions between inside and outside disappear; the subject and life as a whole coalesce. And the weirdest, scariest, most threatening otherness is a version of the self that marks and enacts its own obliteration, intensifying the use of the grotesque in producing the uncanny by ripping past the oppositions and recognitions of "homely" and "unhomely" into "the categorical oppositions such as me/not me, inside/outside, living/dead" that Carroll discusses (32).

<div align="center">VII</div>

David Lynch is often accused of having a sick mind, most famously, perhaps, in Roger Ebert's insinuation in his review of *Blue Velvet* that Lynch's pairing of "jokey, small-town satire" with the hypnotic, darkly exploitative sexual scenes in the film displays "behavior that is more sadistic than the Hopper character." But to return to the epigraph with which I began this chapter, John R. Clark's claim that, "In its shocking way, the modern

grotesque appears to postulate that such a sick man's brain is possibly the lowest common denominator of the human condition itself" may demonstrate that Lynch is up to more than Ebert assumes (Clark 25). Ebert's response to the film seems to touch precisely upon the uneasy feelings that the use of the uncanny grotesque can create: he recognizes the uncomfortably familiar aspects and the "almost hypnotic pull" of disturbing desires portrayed in the film as "born from the darkest and most despairing side of human nature," but then scolds Lynch for juxtaposing this with the "small-town idyll," and the "deadpan irony," platitudes, and corny dialog that go along with it. He writes that what annoyed him most was Lynch's repeated tendency to place "himself between me and the material." One could accuse Lynch of similar techniques in some of his other films: the weird Lynchisms that seem to interrupt the plot, structure, and relationships, but without which the film would be a very different work. Many such aspects are the ones that I have already discussed or alluded to: Lynch's fascination with excess and oddity in the appearances of most any of the "metaphysical" characters, in the death scenes in which dead bodies remain in positions that seem impossible for dead bodies to sustain (Andy in *Lost Highway* and Gordon in *Blue Velvet,* for instance), in scenes in which eroticism and violence merge (in *Blue Velvet, Twin Peaks, Wild at Heart, Fire Walk with Me,* and *Mulholland Dr.*), and in the many severed or missing or blown off body parts in Lynch films. And Lynch is nearly always "placing himself between" the viewer and the material, integrating the various, seemingly polar, associations and values into a grotesque aesthetic that seeks to present them as not polar oppositions, but as identical opposites,

the coincidence of which is, perhaps, necessary—as necessary as it is for the subject (often a protagonist) to fragment, fall apart, and (often) die.

These qualities in Lynch's film—and those related qualities I have spent this chapter discussing along the lines of his use of the concepts of the double and the abhuman—fit well with Meindl's theory of the grotesque, outlined in the first part of this chapter, and also overlap significantly with the uncanny. But, further, Lynch's aesthetics and Meindl's metaphysics of the grotesque seem to insinuate one another. Meindl's Heidegger-based existentialism grounds his theory that the dark, modernist grotesque seeks to dig into human "existential depths," thinking beyond the binaries of subject and object (good and evil, beauty and ugliness, etc.) and scouring the depths of "primitive thinking" (perhaps not unlike the grotesque as Clark's "common denominator") for the visions of madness, terror, myths, and dreams, which the grotesque can reignite and reconstruct in the present moment for reimagined aesthetic conceptualizations of the dark existence (Meindl 31-32). Moreover, Lynch's penchant for experimentation in the film medium that attempts to remind the viewer of the presence and character of the medium (in a way that Ebert finds annoying) also aligns him with Meindl's and Kayser's observations that the grotesque in art intensifies its inclusion of signs of its own "createdness" as art, highlighting the "work" art is and does (Meindl 135; Kayser 184). And Lynch's experimentations with the *mort vivant*, the depiction of the arrested lives of his often delusional characters also aligns him closely with Meindl's explication of the same form of representation of

the flux of "life itself," of Being as such, that he identifies as an important venue of grotesquery in modernist literature (210).

CHAPTER VII

FADE-OUT: CONCLUSIONS

"[N]o man can ever feel his own identity aright except his eyes be closed; as if darkness were indeed the proper element of our essences, though light be more congenial to our clayey part."

—Herman Melville, *Moby-Dick*

"Only what does not fit into this world is true. What is requisite of the artistic act no longer converges with the historical situation, which is not to say that they ever harmonized. This incongruity is not to be eliminated by adaptation: The truth, rather, is in carrying through their conflict."

—Theodor Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*

I

One could point to the grotesque as the context for the kind of truth to which Adorno refers above. In *Aesthetic Theory*, he discusses the dialectical conflict between the beautiful and the ugly:

> The ambiguousness of the ugly results from the fact that the subject subsumes under the abstract and formal category of ugliness everything condemned by art: polymorphous sexuality as well as the violently mutilated and lethal. The perpetually

recurring becomes that antithetical other without which art, according to its own concept, would not exist; appropriated through negation, this other—the antithesis to beauty, whose antithesis beauty was—gnaws away correctively on the affirmativeness of spiritualizing art. (47)

The "ugly," here, seems to have obvious overlap with both "light" and "dark" grotesque and their respective emphases on life, the body, and death. But more to the point: it is precisely this conflict that Adorno gestures towards—a conflict between any number of dialectically opposed concepts that he discusses: unformed and formed, harmonious and dissonant, beautiful and ugly, world and subject, rational and primitive, repressed and unconscious, etc.—which grotesque art takes as its raw materials (46-47). The grotesque is, of course, concerned with the ugly, but it is more precisely concerned with the capturing the way in which the ugly (and all of the other "negative" concepts) "gnaws away" at the beautiful (and all of the other "positive" concepts): grotesquery is the paradox born out of conflict, but a synthesis in which conflict cannot recede or disappear. No: quite the opposite. Grotesque art heightens tensions by pronouncing them, by imaging opposites as one. The grotesque is the name of the quality of the "new" that Adorno identifies, which emerges in "modern art" after ugliness is given its full dialectical power by being freed from "the harmonistic view" that reigned in earlier aesthetics (46). Just as assuredly as the grotesque entails this new, ambiguously paradoxical instantiation of opposites in conflict, it also manifests Adorno's "distintigrative impulse," the death of art, the rupture of expression (52-53).

Duality doubles again: the grotesque relates the birth of the living from conflict of opposites and the death of the dead from their overlap or division—both, as it were, almost identically, at once—uniting, dividing, integrating, fragmenting—the two sides of the Moebius strip at once.

The grotesque as the conflict of opposites, or, more precisely, as the paradoxical complex of relationships among and between these various dualities, in the film-worlds of Tim Burton, Terry Gilliam, Joel and Ethan Coen, and David Lynch has been the critical center of this study of the grotesque in contemporary American film. But, though this study demonstrates these directors' engagement with the grotesque—Burton's through the duality of the "carnival" and the "official," Gilliam's through the related binaries of madness and sanity and mythic and rational thinking, the Coens' with attention to the paradoxical copresence of the catastrophic and the mundane, and Lynch's with an approach built around interpreting the a/effects of duality or multiplicity—a more thoroughgoing interpretation of the grotesque in contemporary American film can be apprehended by looking across the breadth of the films by these directors.

The preceding chapters illustrate various explorations that can be read as theses related to the particular director in question, but they also represent the progressive effects the grotesque can be seen to have on culture—moving centripetally from "culture" to "subject." While Burton's and Gilliam's films can be placed within related cultural and ideological binaries of the conflicting poles associated with carnival and its official other, imagination and rationality, madness and sanity, and the threats of each to its other, the Coens'

films, in my reading, attempt to depict the effects of such conflicts in the ambiguous exploded moments of the interval in which they reach their climaxes in particular characters' lives. This interpretation places the Coens' films within the "parallax gap" (to borrow a phrase from Žižek), the "moments of extremis" (to use Crews' language), between or within the conflict of opposites, which reveals this gap to be fraught with energy, anxiety, and movement or the notable absence thereof, none of which really reach a point of conveying meaning beyond the ambivalent excesses of these "charged" moments themselves (Žižek, *Parallax* 4; Crews in *Searching for the Wrong-Eyed Jesus*). Lynch's films, then, transport the effects of such conflicts to within the subject itself—in the forms of fantasies, nightmares, and variously manifested threats that emerge from within the subject or from some metaphysical "outside" that works its way within. His films feature such "internalized" variations on these related binaries or dualisms in which many of the formerly "external" conflicts recur within the mind or are reproduced from within the self, within which the subject recognizes itself in a new and troubling way.[1] Each approach centers in on a different emphasis of the manifestation of the conflicts of opposites, and each engages the grotesque in

---

[1] These associations with directors need not be hard and fast "rules" by which the ascriptions I am noting here "need" to take place. Indeed, in more isolated cases of this or that film, these interpretations are nearly interchangeable, as far as the directors who produce them: for example, Lynch's *Wild at Heart* bears stylistic resemblances to the characteristically physical features that I point out in my interpretation of the Coens' films; *The Hudsucker Proxy* owes much in its depiction of urban cityscape to Gilliam's *Brazil*; Gilliam's *Tideland* works in a similar thematic vein to Lynch's approach to the ambiguously fused mind-worlds created by characters in his films; and one could work this circle around among this group of filmmakers a number of times and arrive at similar approaches to their resemblances.

a way that can be interpreted as characteristic of his/their cinematic style to represent the way in which such dialectical paradoxes of the grotesque affect the human condition.

<div align="center">II</div>

Perhaps an even more appropriate analogy for married relations of opposites out of which grotesque is born than the Moebius strip is the human condition. The epigraph from Melville relates something of this relationship in its preoccupation with light and dark, body and essence, self and world, his protagonist thrown between and among them (55). In context, the quote arises out of one of Ishmael's many reflections in a seemingly insignificant moment early in *Moby-Dick*. Ishmael observes that in bed, in order to feel most at home with himself and in his room, "I have a way of always keeping my eyes shut . . . . Because no man can ever feel his own identity aright except his eyes be closed; as if darkness were indeed the proper element of our essences, though light be more congenial to our clayey part" (55). The scene becomes more interesting with the inclusion of part of the next sentence: "Upon opening my eyes then, and coming out of my pleasant and self-created darkness into the imposed and coarse outer gloom of the unilluminated twelve-o'clock-at-night, I experienced a disagreeable revulsion" (55). Not only does one find in this pericope Melville's inversion of the more common Christian identification of human essence (the soul) with light (God, the "divine spark," inner light, etc.), but Ishmael's commentary divides even

darkness against itself, as that which is "self-created," internal, metaphysical, comforting, homely and that which is imposed, external, gloomy, coarse, and alien to the open eye, to the embodied essence, the "clayey part." Ishmael's "disagreeable revulsion" arises from the tables being turned on him: his expectation and control over his own navigation of himself in the world is made impotent by the world, whether by its malevolence or by its dumb indifference; the inner has been externalized against his will; his maxim of identity has been universalized in the world, and his recognition of it brings revulsion because its familiarity is alienated—it is a brief instant of Ishmael's experience of the uncanny metaphysics of the grotesque, but in form it provides a structural analogy between the human condition and the aesthetics of the grotesque.

As with Ishmael's uncanny moment of recognition in the dark of his categories, their contents, the meanings and associations with which they are invested, and of the crippling effects their confusion entails for him, the grotesque emerges similarly as the aesthetic or metaphysical context within which such confusion arises and is recognized. It works according to a principle of macerated mimesis in its isolation, amplification, inversion, division, unification, etc. of any of the competing poles of the paradoxes between which human being finds itself drawn: light and dark, high and low, inside and outside, body and essence, contentment and anxiety, creation and destruction, life and death, good and evil, pleasure and pain, transcendence and obfuscation, the divine and the demonic, movement and stasis, self and other, official and carnival, imaginativeness and bleak materialism, reason

and madness, mythic and modern, and the list goes on. Whether the grotesque is a literary mode, an artistic style, a pattern of thought (archetype, etc.), a metaphysical reality, a social reality, or something else, it is utterly human. Perhaps this is why its fruits seem forbidden but necessary. Perhaps this is why it can elicit desire and disgust, laughter and revulsion—or, simply put, love and hate and everything that comes with them—all at once. The grotesque is caught up with the breadth, depth, and confusion of what it means to be human.

So, I close this study by returning, in a way, to the darkness of Plato's cave. But Melville reminds us, having perhaps internalized Plato's message, that within and around and between the flickering images we perceive in the world there is darkness, an uncontrollable, multivalent, and ungraspable absence that paradoxically bespeaks its presence as some mysterious aspect that is within us, making us who we are, but that threateningly dwarfs us as we recognize that it is not ours, that we have not created it. As far as I can tell, the grotesque is something like the context through which we begin to approach the recognition of Melville's darkness, which seems to be a metaphor for the "charged" paradoxes of the human condition. And, perhaps, as Plato's Socrates realizes in "The Apology," the starting-place of learning wisdom from the dark is an honest and philosophical sense of humility: "For I'm only too aware that I've no claim to being wise in anything great or small" (652).

Works Cited

Adorno, Theodor W. *Aesthetic Theory*. Trans. and ed. Robert Hullot-Kentor.

Minneapolis: Minnesota UP, 1997. Print.

Althusser, Louis. *On Ideology*. 1971. London: Verso, 2008. Print.

Ashbrook, John. *Terry Gilliam*. Harpenden: Pocket Essentials, 2000. Print.

Auerbach, Erich. *Mimesis: The Representation of Reality in Western Literature*.

1968. Trans. Willard R. Trask. Princeton: Princeton UP, 2003. Print.

Bakhtin, Mikhail. *Rabelais and His World*. 1968. Trans. Helene Iswolsky.

Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1984. Print.

- - - . *Speech Genres and Other Late Essays*. Ed. Caryl Emerson and Michael

Holquist. Trans. Vern W. McGee. Austin: U of Texas P, 1986. Print

Bennett, Andrew and Nicholas Royle. *Introduction to Literature, Criticism, and

Theory*, 2nd ed. London: Prentice Hall, 1999. Print.

Bergan, Ronald. *The Coen Brothers*. New York: Thunder's Mouth, 2000. Print.

Bergson, Henri. *Laughter*. Trans. Cloudesley Breretson. New York: Macmillan, 1928.

Print.

Bishop, Ellen. "Bakhtin, Carnival and Comedy: The New Grotesque in *Monty Python

and the Holy Grail*." *Film Criticism* 15.1 (1990): 49-64. Print.

Blackburn, Simon. *Plato's Republic: A Biography*. New York: Atlantic, 2006. Print.

Blake, William. *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*. Oxford: Oxford UP, 1975. Print.

Bordwell, David, Janet Staiger, and Kristin Thompson. *The Classical Hollywood

Cinema: Film Style and Mode of Production to 1960*. New York: Columbia

UP, 1985. Print.

- - - . "The Classical Hollywood Style, 1917-60." Bordwell, Staiger, and Thompson 1-84. Print.

- - - , and Kristin Thompson. *Film Art: An Introduction.* 6th ed. New York: McGraw-Hill, 2001. Print.

- - - , and Janet Staiger. "Historical Implications of the Classical Hollywood Cinema." Bordwell, Staiger, and Thompson 365-85. Print.

Bosch, Hieronymus. *Altar of the Hermits.* Palazzo Ducale, Venice.

- - - . *The Last Judgment.* Genaldegalerie der Akademie der bildenden Kunste, Vienna.

Boyd, Katrina G. "Pastiche and Postmodernism in *Brazil.*" *Cinefocus* I (1990): 33-42. Breskin, David. "Tim Burton." Fraga 37-88. Print.

Brottman, Mikita. "Kinda Funny Lookin': Steve Buscemi's Disorderly Body." *The Coen Brothers'* Fargo. Ed. William G. Luhr. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2004. 77-91. Print.

Browning, Tod, dir. *Dracula.* 1931. Universal, 2006. DVD.

- - - , dir. *Freaks.* 1932. Warner, 2004. DVD.

Burton, Tim, dir. *Alice in Wonderland.* Disney, 2010. Film.

- - - , dir. *Batman.* 1989. Warner Bros, 2009. DVD.

- - - , dir. *Batman Returns.* 1992. Warner Bros, 2009. DVD.

- - - , dir. *Beetlejuice.* 1988. Geffen, 2008. DVD.

- - - , dir. *Big Fish.* 2003. Columbia, 2004. DVD.

- - - , dir. *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory.* 2005. Warner Bros, 2005. DVD.

- - - , dir. *Edward Scissorhands.* 1990. Fox, 2000. DVD.

- - - , dir. *Ed Wood.* 1994. Touchstone, 2004. DVD.

- - - , dir. *Frankenweenie*. 1982. Disney. *Tim Burton's the Nightmare Before Christmas*. Special ed. 1993. Touchstone, 2000. DVD.

- - - , dir. *Mars Attacks!* 1996. Warner Bros, 2004. DVD.

- - - . *The Melancholy Death of Oyster Boy & Other Stories*. New York: HarperCollins, 1997. Print.

- - - , dir. *Planet of the Apes*. 2001. Fox, 2001. DVD.

- - - , dir. *Sweeney Todd: The Demon Barber of Fleet Street*. 2007. Dreamworks, 2008. DVD.

- - - , dir. *Tim Burton's Corpse Bride*. 2005. Warner Bros, 2006. DVD.

- - -, prod. *Tim Burton's The Nightmare Before Christmas*. 1993. Touchstone, 2000. DVD.

- - - , dir. *Vincent*. 1982. Disney. *Tim Burton's the Nightmare Before Christmas*. Special ed. 1993. Touchstone, 2000. DVD.

- - - , dir. *The World of Stainboy*. 2000. *The Tim Burton Collective*. Web. 15 Jan. 2010.

Camus, Albert. "An Absurd Reasoning." *The Myth of Sisyphus and Other Essays*. Trans. Justin O'Brien. New York: Vintage, 1955. 3-48. Print.

- - - . *The Stranger*. Trans. Matthew Ward. New York: Vintage, 1988. Print.

Carroll, Lewis. *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*. 1865. New York: Barnes and Noble, 2004. Print.

Carroll, Noel. *The Philosophy of Horror, Or Paradoxes of the Heart*. New York: Routledge, 1990. Print.

Cassuto, Leonard. *The Inhuman Race: The Racial Grotesque in American Literature and Culture*. New York: Columbia UP, 1997. Print.

Chaplin, Charles, dir. *The Gold Rush*. 1925. Warner, 2003. DVD.

- - - , dir. *The Kid*. 1921. Warner, 2004. DVD.

- - - , dir. *Modern Times*. 1936. Warner, 2003. DVD.

- - - , dir. *Monsieur Verdoux*. 1947. Warner, 2004. DVD.

Childs, Elizabeth C. "Eden's Other: Gauguin and the Ethnographic Other." *Modern Art and the Grotesque*. Ed. Frances S. Connelly. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2003. 175-92. Print.

Chion, Michel. *David Lynch*, 2nd ed. Trans. Robert Julian and Trista Selous. London: British Film Institute, 2006. Print.

Christie, Ian, ed. *Gilliam On Gilliam*. London: Faber and Faber, 1999. Print.

Ciment, Michel, and Hubert Niogret. "The Logic of Soft Drugs." Trans. Paul Buck and Catherine Petit. Woods, *Joel and Ethan Coen* 167-173. Print.

Clark, John R. *The Modern Satiric Grotesque and Its Traditions*. Lexington: UP of Kentucky, 1991. Print.

Clayborough, Arthur. *The Grotesque in English Literature*. London: Oxford UP, 1965. Print.

Joel Coen, dir. *Barton Fink*. 1991. Fox. 2003. DVD.

- - - , dir. *The Big Lebowski*. 1998. Universal. 1998. DVD.

- - - , dir. *Blood Simple*. 1985. Circle. 2001. DVD.

- - - , dir. *O Brother, Where Art Thou?* 2000. Touchstone. 2001. DVD.

- - - , dir. *Burn After Reading*. 2008. Universal. 2008. DVD.

- - - , dir. *Fargo*. 1996. MGM. 2000. DVD.

- - - , dir. *The Hudsucker Proxy*. 1994. Warner Bros. 1999. DVD.

- - - , dir. *Intolerable Cruelty*. 2003. Universal. 2004. DVD.

- - -, dir. *The Ladykillers*. 2004. Touchstone. 2004. DVD.

- - -, dir. *The Man Who Wasn't There*. 2001. Universal. 2002. DVD.

- - -, dir. *Miller's Crossing*. 1990. Fox. 2003. DVD.

- - -, dir. *No Country for Old Men*. 2007. Paramount. 2008. DVD.

- - -, dir. *Raising Arizona*. 1987. Fox. 1999. DVD.

- - -, dir. *A Serious Man*. 2009. Focus. 2010. DVD.

Comentale, Edward P. "'I'll Keep Rolling Along': Some Notes on Singing Cowboys
and Bowling Alleys in *The Big Lebowski*." Comentale and Jaffe 228-252.
Print.

- - -, and Arron Jaffe, Eds. *The Year's Work in* Lebowski *Studies*. Bloomington: U of
Indiana P, 2009. Print.

Conley, Matthew. "Imagining the Past: The Films of Terry Gilliam." MA Thesis.
Middle Tenn. State U, 1999. Print.

Cook, David A. *A History of Narrative Film*. 3rd ed. New York: Norton, 1996. Print.

Coppola, Francis Ford, dir. *Apocalypse Now*. 1979. Paramount, 2004. DVD.

Corliss, Richard. "Battier and Battier." Woods, *Tim Burton* 77-79. Print.

Costa, Jerdi, and Sergi Sanchez. "Childhood, Vocation, and First Experiences of a
Rebel Dreamer." Sterritt and Rhodes 170-83. Print.

Coughlin, Paul. "Acting for Real: Performing Characters in *Miller's Crossing* and
Fargo. *The Journal of Popular Culture* 41.2 (2008): 224-44. Print.

Danow, David K. *The Spirit of Carnival: Magical Realism and the Grotesque*.
Lexington: UP of Kentucky, 1995. Print.

Dargis, Manohla. Rev. of *Big Fish*, dir. Tim Burton. Woods, *Tim Burton* 174-75.
Print.

Denby, David. "Babes in Cinema Land." Woods, *Tim Burton* 37-39. Print.

Doty, Robert. *Human Concern/Personal Torment: The Grotesque in American Art.*

New York: Whitney Museum of American Art, 1969. Print.

Douglass, Edward. "Director of the Living Dead." Woods, *Tim Burton* 183- 86. Print.

Eagleton, Terry. *Walter Benjamin Or Towards a Revolutionary Criticism.* 1981.

Brooklyn: Verso, 2009. Print.

Ebert, Roger. Rev. of *Alice in Wonderland,* dir. Tim Burton. *Rogerebert.com.*

Chicago Sun-Times, 3 March 2010. Web. 8 March 2010.

- - - . Rev. of *Blue Velvet,* dir. David Lynch. *Rogerebert.com.* Chicago Sun- Times, 19

Sept. 1986. Web. 26 Aug. 2010

- - - . Rev. of *The Brothers Grimm,* dir. Terry Gilliam. *Rogerebert.com.* Chicago Sun-

Times, 26 Aug. 2005. Web. 10 July 2010.

- - - . Rev. of *The Imaginarium of Doctor Parnassus,* dir. Terry Gilliam.

Rogerebert.com. Chicago Sun-Times, 6 Jan. 2010. Web. 14 July2010.

Eco, Umberto. Ed. *On Ugliness.* Trans. Alastair McEwen. New York: Rizzoli, 2007.

Edelstein, David. "Burton's *Alice*: a Curious Kind of Wonderful." *Fresh Air.* National

Public Radio, 4 March 2010. Web. 8 March 2010.

- - - . "Odd Man In." Fraga 31-36. Print.

Falsani, Cathleen. *The Dude Abides: The Gospel According to the Coen Brothers.*

Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2009. Print.

Fellini, Federico, dir. *Fellini-Satyricon.* 1970. MGM. 2001. DVD.

- - - , dir. *Juliet of the Spirits.* 1965. Criterion. 2002. DVD.

Felperin, Leslie. "Animated Dreams." Woods, *Tim Burton* 102-107. Print.

Foucault, Michel. *Madness and Civilization: A History of Insanity in the Age of Reason.* 1965. Trans. Richard Howard. New York: Vintage, 1988. Print.

Fraga, Kristian, ed. *Tim Burton: Interviews.* Jackson: UP of Mississippi, 2005. Print.

Freud, Sigmund. *Beyond the Pleasure Principle.* Trans. James Strachey. New York: Norton, 1961. Print.

- - - . *New Introductory Lectures on Psycho-Analysis.* Trans. and ed. James Strachey. New York: Norton, 1964. Print.

- - - . *The Uncanny.* Trans. David McLintock. New York: Penguin, 2003. Print.

Freund, Karl, dir. *The Mummy.* 1932. Universal, 2008. DVD.

Frye, Northrop. *Fearful Symmetry: A Study of William Blake.* 1947. Princeton: Princeton UP, 1990. Print.

Gabriel, Markus, and Slavoj Žižek. *Myth, Madness, and Laughter: Subjectivity in German Idealism.* London: Continuum, 2009. Print.

Gilliam, Terry, dir. *The Adventures of Baron Munchausen.* 1989. Sony. 1999. DVD.

- - - , dir. *Brazil.* 1985. Universal. 1998. DVD.

- - - , dir. *The Brothers Grimm.* 2005. Miramax. 2005. DVD.

- - - , dir. *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas.* 1998. Universal. 1998. DVD.

- - - , dir. *The Fisher King.* 1991. Sony. 1999. DVD.

- - - , dir. *The Imaginarium of Doctor Parnassus.* 2009. Sony. 2010. DVD.

- - - . Interview with Phil Stubbs. *Dreams.* Smart. Aug. 2005. Web. 14 July 2010.

- - - . Interview with Paul Fischer. *Dark Horizons.* n.p., Dec. 2009. Web. 14 July 2010.

- - - , dir. *Jabberwocky.* 1977. Sony, 2001. DVD.

- - - , and Terry Jones, dirs. *Monty Python and the Holy Grail*. 1975. Sony, 1999. DVD.

- - - , dir. *Tideland*. 2005. Velocity/Thinkfilm. 2007. DVD.

- - - , dir. *Time Bandits*. 1981. Criterion. 1999. DVD.

- - - , dir. *Twelve Monkeys*. 1996. Universal. 2005. DVD.

Gilmore, Richard. "*No Country for Old Men*: The Coens' Tragic Western." *The Philosophy of the Coen Brothers*. Ed. Mark T. Conrad. Lexington: UP of Kentucky, 2009. 55-78. Print.

Gramsci, Antonio. *Selections from the Prison Notebooks*. Ed. and Trans. Quintin Hoare and Geoffrey Nowell Smith. New York: International, 1997. Print.

Grant, Barry Keith. *Film Genre: From Iconography to Ideology*. New York: Wallflower, 2007. Print.

Griffith, D.W. *Birth of a Nation*. 1915. Alpha, 2005. DVD.

Hamilton, Edith. *Mythology*. 1942. New York: Little, Brown, & Co., 1998. Print.

Harpham, Geoffrey Galt. *On the Grotesque: Strategies of Contradiction in Art and Literature*. Princeton: Princeton UP, 1982. Print.

He, Jenny. "An Auteur for All Ages." *Tim Burton*. New York: MOMA, 2009. 17-23. Print.

Hitchcock, Alfred, dir. *The Birds*. 1963. Universal, 2000. DVD.

- - - , dir. *Marnie*. 1964. Universal, 2006. DVD.

- - - , dir. *Psycho*. 1960. Universal, 1998. DVD.

- - - , dir. *Rope*. 1948. Warner Bros., 2006. DVD.

- - - , dir. *Shadow of a Doubt*. 1943. Universal, 2001. DVD.

- - - , dir. *Spellbound*. 1945. Starz/Anchor Bay, 1999. DVD.

- - - , dir. *Strangers on a Train*. 1951. Warner, 1997. DVD.

- - - , dir. *Vertigo*. 1958. Universal, 1998. DVD.

Hoberman, J. "Pax Americana." Woods, *Tim Burton* 138-43. Print.

Hopper, Dennis, dir. *Easy Rider*. 1969. DVD. Sony, 2002.

Hurley, Kelly. "British Gothic Fiction, 1885-1930." *The Cambridge Companion to Gothic Fiction*. Ed. Jerrold E. Hogle. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2002. 189-208. Print.

Johnson, Samuel. *Preface to Shakespeare. The Plays of William Shakespeare*. 1765. New York: AMS, 1968. Vol. 1 of 8. v-vlxxii. Print.

Jenkins, Mark. Rev. of *Imaginarium of Doctor Parnassus*, dir. Terry Gilliam. *Npr.org*. National Public Radio, 23 Dec. 2009. Web. 14 July 2010.

Jerslev, Anne. "Beyond Boundaries: David Lynch's *Lost Highway*." Sheen and Davidson 151-164. Print.

Jung, Carl Gustav. "The Psychological Function of Archetypes." *The Modern Tradition: Backgrounds of Modern Literature*. New York: Oxford UP, 1965. 648-653. Print.

Kaleta, Kenneth C. *David Lynch*. New York: Twayne, 1993. Print.

Kayser, Wolfgang. *The Grotesque in Art and Literature*. 1963. Trans. Ulrich Weisstein. New York: McGraw-Hill, 1966. Print.

Keaton, Buster, perf. *The Navigator*. Dir. Donald Crisp. 1924. Image, 1999. DVD.

- - - , perf. *Steamboat Bill, Jr*. Dir. Charles Reisner. 1928. Image, 1999. DVD.

Kember, Joe. "David Lynch and the Mug Shot: Facework in *The Elephant Man* and *The Straight Story*." Sheen and Davidson 19-34. Print.

Kierkegaard, Soren. *Concluding Unscientific Postscript to Philosophical Fragments.*
Ed. and trans. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong. Princeton: Princeton UP,
1992. Print.

Knight, G. Wilson. "*Lear* and the Comedy of the Grotesque." *The Wheel of Fire:
Essays in Interpretation of Shakespeare's Sombre Tragedies.* London:
Oxford UP, 1930. 175-93. Print.

Kubric, Stanley, dir. *Dr. Strangelove, Or: How I Learned to Stop Worrying and
Love the Bomb.* DVD. Sony, 2001. DVD.

Langford, Barry. *Film Genre: Hollywood and Beyond.* Edinburgh: Edinburgh UP,
2005. Print.

Lowe, Andy. "The Brothers Grim." Woods, *Joel and Ethan Coen* 162-66. Print.

Lynch, David, dir. *The Alphabet.* 1968. *The Short Films of David Lynch.*
Absurda/Ryko, 2006. DVD.

- - - , dir. *The Amputee.* 1974. *The Short Films of David Lynch.* Absurda/Ryko, 2006.
DVD.

- - - , dir. *Blue Velvet.* 1986. MGM, 2002. DVD.

- - - , dir. *Dune.* 1984. Universal, 1998. DVD.

- - - , dir. *The Elephant Man.* 1980. Paramount, 2001. DVD.

- - - , dir. *Eraserhead.* 1976. Absurda/Ryko, 2006. DVD.

- - - , dir. *The Grandmother.* 1970. *The Short Films of David Lynch.* Absurda/Ryko,
2006. DVD.

- - - , dir. *Inland Empire.* 2006. Absurda/Rhino, 2007. DVD.

- - - , dir. *Lost Highway.* 1997. Universal, 2008. DVD.

- - - , dir. *Mulholland Dr.* 2001. Universal, 2002. DVD.

- - - , dir. *The Straight Story*. 1999. Disney, 2000. DVD.

- - - , and Mark Frost, creators. *Twin Peaks*. Pilot and 29 episodes. 1989-90.
Paramount, 2007. DVD set.

- - - , dir. *Twin Peaks: Fire Walk with Me*. 1992. New Line, 2002. DVD.

- - - , dir. *Wild at Heart*. 1990. MGM, 2004. DVD.

MacTaggart, Allister. *The Film Paintings of David Lynch: Challenging Film Theory*.
Chicago: Intellect, 2010. Print.

Magliozzi, Ron. "Tim Burton: Exercising the Imagination." *Tim Burton*. New York:
MOMA, 2009. 9-15. Print.

Martin, Paul, and Valerie Renegar. "'The Man for His Time': *The Big Lebowski* as
Carnivalesque Social Critique." *Communications Studies* 58.3 (2007): 299-
313. *Academic OneFile*. Web. 3 March 2010.

McCabe, Bob. "Chemical Warfare." Sterritt and Rhodes 135-40. Print.

- - - . *Dark Knights and Holy Fools: The Art and Films of Terry Gilliam*. New York:
Universe, 1999. Print.

McCarthy, Cormac. *No Country for Old Men*. New York: Vintage, 2005. Print.

McFarland, Douglas. "Philosophies of Comedy in *O Brother, Where Art Thou?*" *The
Philosophy of the Coen Brothers*. Ed. Mark T. Conrad. Lexington: UP of
Kentucky, 2009. 41-54. Print.

McGowan, Tod. *The Impossible David Lynch*. New York: Columbia UP, 2007. Print.

Melies, Georges. *Voyage to the Moon*. 1902. *The Magic of Melies*. Facets, 2002.
DVD.

Meindl, Dieter. *American Fiction and the Metaphysics of the Grotesque*. Columbia:
U of Missouri P, 1996. Print.

Melville, Herman. *Moby-Dick, Or the White Whale*. 1851. New York: Dover, 2003.

Print.

Merschmann, Helmut. *Tim Burton: The Life of a Visionary Director*. Trans. Michael

Kane. London: Titan, 2000. Print.

Milbank, Alison. "Divine Beauty and the Grotesque in Dante's *Paradiso*." *Yearbook*

of English Studies 39 (2009): 155-68. *Academic OneFile*. Web. 13 Feb. 2010.

Miles, Margaret. "Carnal Abominations: The Female Body as Grotesque." *The*

Grotesque in Art and Literature: Theological Reflections. Ed. James Luther Adams

and Wilson Yates. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997. 83-112. Print.

Miles, Robert. *Gothic Writing, 1750-1820: A Genealogy*. Manchester: Manchester

UP, 2000. Print.

Mills, David. "One on One: Tim Burton." Woods, *Tim Burton* 147-50. Print.

Morson, Gary Saul. "Dialogue, Monologue and the Social: A Reply to Ken

Hirschkop." *Bakhtin: Essays and Dialogue in His Work*. Ed. Gary Saul

Morson. Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1986. Print.

Mottram, James. *The Coen Brothers: The Life of the Mind*. Dulles: Brassey's, 2000.

Print.

Mulvey, Laura. *Fetishism and Curiosity*. Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1996. Print.

Newman, Kim. "The Cage of Reason." Woods, *Tim Burton* 156-60. Print.

- - - . Rev. of *Mars Attacks*, dir. Tim Burton. Woods, *Tim Burton* 143-45. Print.

Olson, Greg. *David Lynch: Beautiful Dark*. Lanham: Scarecrow, 2008. Print.

Page, Edwin. *Gothic Fantasy: The Films of Tim Burton*. London: Marion Boyars,

2007. Print.

Palmer, R. Barton. *Joel and Ethan Coen*. Urbana: U of Illinois P, 2004. Print.

Parkinson, David. *History of Film*. 1995. London: Thames and Hudson, 1997. Print.

Pascal, Blaise. *Pensees (Thoughts)*. Trans. W. F. Trotter. Mineola: Dover, 2003.

    Print.

Pearson, Roberta E. *Eloquent Gestures: The Transformation of Performance Style*

    in the Griffith Biograph Films. Berkeley: U of California P, 1992. Print.

Pelegrin, Allison. "Funeral Dawn." *The Zydeco Tablets*. Cincinnati: Word, 2002. 19.

    Print.

Penn, Arthur, dir. *Bonny and Clyde*. 1967. DVD. Warner Bros./Seven Arts, 1999.

Plato. "The Apology of Socrates." Trans. C. D. Reeve. *The Norton Anthology of*

    World Literature, shorter 2nd ed. Ed. John Bierhorst, et al. New York: Norton,

    2009. 648-69. Print.

- - - . *The Republic*. Trans. C. D. C. Reeve. Indianapolis: Hackett, 2004. Print.

Poe, Edgar Allan. "The Fall of the House of Usher." *Great Short Works of Edgar*

    Allan Poe. Ed. G. R. Thompson. New York: Harper & Row, 1970. 216-37.

    Print.

Punter, David, and Glennis Byron. *The Gothic*. Malden: Blackwell, 2004. Print.

Rea, Steven. "Birth of *Baron* Was Tough on Gilliam." Sterritt and Rhodes 47- 51.

    Print.

Reed, Cory A. "*Batman Returns*: From the Comic(s) to the Grotesque." *Post Script*

    14.3 (1995): 37-50. Print.

Rev. of *Raising Arizona*. *Variety* 4 Mar. 1987. Woods, *Joel and Ethan Coen* 45-46.

    Print.

Richardson, John H. "The Joel and Ethan Story." Woods, *Joel and Ethan Coen* 81-

    87. Print.

Robson, Eddie. *Coen Brothers*. London: Virgin, 2003. Print.

Rodley, Chris, ed. *Lynch on Lynch*, rev. ed. New York: Faber and Faber, 2005. Print.

Ross, Christine. "Redefinitions of Abjection in Contemporary Performance of the
Female Body." *Modern Art and the Grotesque*. Ed. Frances S. Connelly.
Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2003. 281-91. Print.

Russo, Mary. *The Female Grotesque: Risk, Excess and Modernity*. New York:
Routledge, 1994. Print.

Rowell, Erica. *The Brothers Grim: The Films of Ethan and Joel Coen*. Lanham:
Scarecrow, 2007. Print.

Salisbury, Mark, ed. *Burton on Burton*. Rev. ed. London: Faber and Faber, 2006.
Print.

- - - . "Graveyard Shift." Woods, *Tim Burton* 150-55. Print.

Santayana, George. *The Sense of Beauty: Being the Outlines of Aesthetic Theory*.
1896. Ann Arbor: U of Michigan P, 2006. Print.

Schaefer, Dirk. "The Film Music of Danny Elfman." *Tim Burton: The Life and Art of
a Visionary Director*. Trans. Michael Kane. London: Titan, 2000. 143-62.
Print.

Schneider, Steven Jay. "The Essential Evil in/of *Eraserhead* (or, Lynch to the
Contrary)." Sheen and Davidson 5-18. Print.

Schoenberg, Arnold. "An Artistic Impression." Trans. Leo Black. *Style and Idea:
Selected Writings of Arnold Schoenberg*. 1975. Ed. Leonard Stein. Berkeley: U
of California P, 1984. 189-91. Print.

Searching for the Wrong-Eyed Jesus. Dir. Andrew Douglas. 2003. Image, 2003.
DVD.

Seesslen, Georg, and Peter Korte, eds. *Joel and Ethan Coen.* Trans. Rory

    Mulholland. New York: Limelight, 2001. Print.

- - - . "Crimewave." Seesslen and Korte 17-39. Print.

Shapiro, Marc. "Explaining *Beetlejuice.*" Fraga 3-8. Print.

Sheen, Erica, and Annette Davidson, eds. *The Cinema of David Lynch: American*

    Dreams, Nightmare Visions. New York: Wallflower, 2004. Print.

Smith, Jim, and J. Clive Matthews. *Tim Burton.* London: Virgin, 2007. Print.

Smithee, Allan. "What Condition the Postmodern Condition Is In: Collecting Culture

    in *The Big Lebowski.*" Comentale and Jaffe 255-75. Print.

Stanfield, Peter. *Horse Opera: The Strange History of the 1930s Singing Cowboy.*

    Urbana: U of Illinois P, 2002. Print.

Steig, Michael. "Defining the Grotesque: An Attempt at Synthesis." *Journal of*

Aesthetics and Art Criticism 29 (1970): 253–60. Print.

Sterritt, David. "*Fargo* in Context: The Middle of Nowhere?" *The Coen Brothers'*

    Fargo. Ed. William G. Luhr. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2004. 10-32. Print.

- - - , and Lucille Rhodes, eds. *Terry Gilliam: Interviews.* Jackson: U of Miss. P,

    2004. Print.

Stevenson, Robert Louis. *The Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde. The Strange*

    Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde and Other Stories. Ed. George Stade. New

    York: Barnes and Noble, 2003. 3-78. Print.

Thompson, Hunter S. *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas: A Savage Journey to the*

    Heart of the American Dream. 1971. New York: Vintage, 1998. Print.

Thompson, John O., ed. *Monty Python: Complete and Utter Theory of the*

    Grotesque. 1982. London: British Film Institute, 1984. Print.

Thomson, Phillip. *The Grotesque*. London: Methuen, 1972. Print.

Van Boeschoten, Robert. "Revisited." *Culture and Organization* 11.4 (2005): 269-74. *Academic OneFile*. Web. 14 Aug. 2010.

Vidler, Anthony. *The Architectural Uncanny: Essays in the Modern Unhomely*. Cambridge: MIT, 1992. Print.

Watt, Ian. *The Rise of the Novel: Studies in Defoe, Richardson, and Fielding*. Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1963. Print.

Whale, James. *Bride of Frankenstein*. 1935. Universal, 1999. DVD.

- - - , dir. *Frankenstein*. 1931. Universal, 1999. DVD.

- - - , dir. *The Invisible Man*. 1933. Universal, 2000. DVD.

Wiene, Robert, dir. *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari*. 1921. Kino, 2002. DVD.

Wilde, Oscar. *The Picture of Dorian Gray*. 1891. New York: Dover, 1993. Print.

Wood, Edward D., dir. *Plan 9 from Outer Space*. 1959. Image, 2000. DVD.

Woods, Paul A., ed. *Tim Burton: A Child's Garden of Nightmares*. Rev. ed. London: Plexus, 2007. Print.

- - - , ed. *Joel and Ethan Coen: Blood Siblings*. London: Plexus, 2003. Print.

Yates, Wilson. "An Introduction to the Grotesque: Theoretical and Theological Considerations." *The Grotesque in Art and Literature: Theological Reflections*. Ed. James Luther Adams and Wilson Yates. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997. 1-68. Print.

Zacharek, Stephanie. Rev. of *Tim Burton's Corpse Bride*, dir. Tim Burton. Woods, *Tim Burton* 187-88. Print.

Žižek, Slavoj. *The Art of the Ridiculous Sublime: On David Lynch's Lost Highway*. Seatle: Walter Chapin Simpson Center for the Humanities, 2000. Print.

- - - . *Enjoy Your Symptom: Jacques Lacan in Hollywood and Out*. New York: Routledge, 1992. Print.

- - - , and John Milbank. *The Monstrosity of Christ: Paradox or Dialectic?* Ed. Creston Davis. Cambridge: MIT P, 2009. Print.

- - - . *The Parallax View*. Cambridge: MIT P, 2006. Print.