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The Grotesque Modernist Body

Gothic Horror and Carnival Satire in Art and Writing

David Cruickshank

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Wembley, UK

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Djuna Barnes, *Nightwood*	N
Djuna Barnes, *The Book of Repulsive Women*	BRW
Edgar Allan Poe, *Murders in the Rue Morgue*	MRM
Geoffrey Galt Harpham, *On the Grotesque Strategies of Contradiction in Art and Literature*	Harpham
Heinrich von Kleist, 'Michael Kohlhaas'	MK
Joseph Conrad, *The Secret Agent*	SA
Joseph Conrad, *Heart of Darkness*	HD
Joseph Conrad, *Under Western Eyes*	UWE
Julia Kristeva, *Powers of Horror An Essay on Abjection*	Kristeva
Mary Shelley, *Frankenstein*	F
Mikhail Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World*	Bakhtin
Shun-Liang Chao, *Rethinking the Concept of the Grotesque*	Chao
T.S. Eliot, *The Waste Land*	WL
T.S. Eliot, *Collected Poems*	CP
T.S. Eliot, *Inventions of the March Hare*	IMH
Wolfgang Kayser, *The Grotesque in Art and Literature*	Kayser
Wyndham Lewis, *The Apes of God*	AG
Wyndham Lewis, *Tarr*	T
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CHAPTER 1

A Grotesque Modern Moment

Although the presence of grotesque bodies in modernist texts has often been commented on by critics, these bodies have not been fully explored and are rarely seen as an essential aspect of modernist style. Nor, indeed, are they thought to be intimately entangled with 'the modern' more generally.[1] Through a discussion of the literary—and in several cases visual—works of Joseph Conrad, Wyndham Lewis, T.S. Eliot and Djuna Barnes, I will show that the embodiment of the grotesque in modernist literature is critical to understanding modernism as a stylistic entity more generally, and as a movement brought about by socio-political, economic, scientific and technological upheavals of the early twentieth century. These authors all use similar imagery—human-impersonating automatons, living corpses and savage animal-human hybrids—to construct similar-looking, but often contradictory, responses to modernity. Their use of the body in this way is not an accident or coincidence; Conrad, Lewis, Eliot and Barnes all draw their bodies from distinctly grotesque sources, reworking these images to suit their specific contextual, personal and stylistic goals. By tracing this tradition of the grotesque body back to medieval satire and gothic literature, we come to a better understanding of how modernists viewed their 'modern' moment: a time that is both the *fin de siècle*—the

[1] For example, see Istvan Csicsery-Ronay Jr., 'On the Grotesque in Science Fiction,' *Science Fiction Studies* 29, no.1 (2002): 71; Csicsery-Ronay claims the grotesque is 'the dominant sensibility of modernism' but does not elaborate on this claim.

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end of an era—and the beginning of a new, unknown epoch. This modern moment is itself a grotesque merging of past and future, producing a hybrid modernity where progress and regression lead to the same, uncertain destination.

Before I explain why these four authors are invaluable to understanding modernism, the body, and the grotesque, I must first explain what the modernist grotesque body is and why studying it is important. There are three key issues surrounding the use of grotesque bodies in modernist literature (and art) that need to be addressed. Firstly, despite the dearth of criticism on the subject, I argue that the grotesque survives in modernist literature. Modernism draws upon both visual and literary traditions of the grotesque, as seen in the works of Barnes and Lewis, who use visual imagery to inform their writing and vice-versa. Both modernists frequently depict the same idea in different media, demonstrating the shared history between seeing and writing the grotesque. Second, I want to establish the 'modernity' of the grotesque. All four authors draw upon earlier sources of the grotesque, but in doing so they adapt its imagery to their own contemporary concerns. These modernist uses of the body produce grotesques that represent the *present*: the uncertainty of their changing society and their consequent alienation from it. Thirdly, I want to show how modernist bodies are useful tools for comprehending the grotesque's ambivalent effect, and how bodies are conceived of in modernist works. Grotesque bodies make confusion and uncertainty visible by marking them on physical forms. Bodies allow authors, critics and readers to confront 'reality,' and how reality often fails to obey the socially constructed codes of 'realism' used to understand it. Depictions of the body provide a structural organising principle with which to understand this collapse of semantic meaning, and the collapse of the text itself under the weight of social and authorial demands. Although I am hesitant to define the grotesque in this introduction, or to make proclamations about how we should interpret it, this is unavoidable to some extent if we are to use it as a framework for discussion. While the word 'framework' implies structure and definition that both modernism and the grotesque seemingly lack, we can still use the grotesque body to discover *why* modernism endorsed the grotesque as the most valuable method for understanding modern reality.

I argue that gothic horror and carnival satire, particularly from the long nineteenth century, are continually referenced and adapted into modernist works via modernist depictions of the body as grotesque: something unfinished, hybrid, automatic and otherwise outside our ownership and

control. Modernism adapts gothic depictions the body, possessed by forces outside human understanding, in order to represent humans reduced to machines, tools and animals by a capitalist, imperial society that values the body only for its use as a profitable tool or commodity. However, as seen in these works—and in Lewis's work in particular—the destabilisation of rigid boundaries can also be a liberating, comedic force. The uncontrollability of the body is the foundation of slapstick comedy, and animal-human-machine hybridisation also produces the absurdity found in the violent and repulsive satires of Rabelais and Swift, but which is minimised in analyses of gothic works. As we will see, modernists recognised and theorised that combinations of humour and horror have unsettling and destabilising powers, and they emphasise this grotesque hybridity in order to question the connection we have, between our idea of the self and the body we inhabit. Their grotesque bodies unsettle the clear-cut boundaries between the individual body, and the material and social worlds which impose themselves upon it from outside.

Analyses of the grotesque in modernism, whilst gesturing towards self-contradiction and ambivalence, usually employ the term simply to describe a work as *either* horrible *or* satiric. Kelly Anspaugh's analysis of grotesquery in James Joyce and Lewis demonstrates the problematic nature of this 'see-saw' analysis. He accuses two prominent theorists of the grotesque, Mikhail Bakhtin and Wolfgang Kayser, of being 'uncomfortable with the ambiguity and [striving] to eliminate it,' but does exactly this in his analysis by referring to the 'differing attitudes-toward and uses-of the grotesque'. Joyce is 'the modernist avatar of Rabelais' while Lewis employs the 'universal gloom and doom' of Swift, and there can be 'no gay carnival here'.[2] In contrast, Francesca Orestano reaches the opposite conclusion, stating that Lewis 'engulfs, at once, tragedy and the comic elements of farce and cabaret,' producing 'the dark, caustic laughter of satire' with 'tramps, buffoons, clowns, innkeepers and mechanical puppets' that 'belong to the stage of the Bakhtinian Carnival'.[3] Shun-Liang Chao even argues that, though the 'fearfulness and joyfulness' of the grotesque are both '*still present*' in modernism, when one 'emerges in pronounced form,

[2] Kelly Anspaugh, '"Jean Qui Rit" and "Jean Qui Plus": James Joyce, Wyndham Lewis and the High Modern Grotesque,' in *Literature and the Grotesque*, ed. Michael J. Meyer (Atlanta: Rodopi, 1995), 129, 132.

[3] Francesca Orestano, 'Arctic Masks in a Castle of Ice: Gothic Vorticism and Wyndham Lewis's *Self Condemened*,' in *Gothic Modernisms*, eds. Andrew Smith and Jeff Wallace (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2001), 170–1.

the other […] retreats into the background'.[4] The grotesque loses much of its potential in being reduced to merely 'dark comedy' or 'satiric horror' like this. It is more important to preserve the grotesque's deliberate ambiguity of feeling than to try and conclusively define it.

However, if we are to use it as a framework for discussion, we must make an attempt at definition and ask: what is the grotesque, and where did it originate? The term 'grottesche' was first coined during the Italian Renaissance to describe the ornamental paintings and sculptures adorning the walls and ceilings of Nero's Golden Palace. These images depicted intertwined animal, human and vegetable forms and fantastic hybrids composed of disparate parts. While these images were the first to be called grotesque, the tradition does not originate from or belong to Rome.[5] Such imagery appears in ancient cave paintings, medieval carnivals, gothic tales, science fiction and, indeed, modernist works. However, the definition of the grotesque—what it signified for artists and how its effects were understood—has changed significantly across these periods. For example, Renaissance artists viewed grotesque bodies as fantastical and absurd. The hybrid monsters they depicted could not exist and were thus confined to the fanciful (Harpham, xviii, xix). However, the grotesque's ability to render the unreal in extremely realistic ways captivated and disturbed artists, audiences and critics alike. By exploiting the rationalist codes used to represent 'reality' in order to instead code 'unreality,' Renaissance artists could invent monsters of such detail that it seemed they might, in fact, actually exist. These grotesques violated the mimetic relationship between reality and artistic representation, and thus came to signify the separation of the human mind from the world it inhabited.

By the mid-eighteenth century, however, Gothic works by authors such as Horace Walpole and Clara Reeve had begun to shift the grotesque from fantasy into the supernatural, employing themes of horror, possession, and madness in its combinations of strange bodies and forms. Rejecting Renaissance reason and rationality, gothic works instead dealt with absurd decadence and decay, influencing everything from the works of Samuel Taylor Coleridge to the Marquis de Sade. In the wake of the violence of the French Revolution (Harpham, xix), however, such fantastical horror became reality, as Francisco Goya illustrates in his painting *The Sleep of*

[4] Shun-Liang Chao, *Rethinking the Concept of the Grotesque* (London: Maney, 2010), 169.

[5] Geoffrey Galt Harpham, *On the Grotesque: Strategies of Contradiction in Art and Literature* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1982), xvi.

Reason Produces Monsters (1799), where a sleeping figure's runaway intellect produces nightmarish hybrid creatures. The transformation of knowledge—traditionally symbolised by the owl—into obscured, black bats in this image represents the shift the grotesque underwent over this period. These texts employed this new conception of grotesquery to depict the violent and strange nature of their modern world, where logic was used in service of mass-destruction. Gothic works such as Mary Shelly's *Frankenstein* questioned Renaissance assumptions about the fundamental power of the human mind to describe the world and, like the *Révolution Française*, turned reason into madness. Of course, the gothic as a genre did not end here. Henry James' *The Turn of the Screw* (1898) continued these themes of madness, possession, and the impossibility of knowledge, all of which influenced Joseph Conrad, who viewed James as a mentor. H.G. Wells' *The Island of Doctor Moreau* (1896) partakes in much the same scientific horror as Shelly did—to call it merely 'science fiction' is to ignore its distinctly gothic and grotesque origins in vivisection, hybridisation, and the dangerous limits of human reason, especially when that reason is turned against humanity.

Even today, the very definition of 'grotesque' is still indeterminate, suggesting a wider problem with our conception of what the grotesque is and does. This definitional ambiguity is reflected in the much wider lack of consensus among critics concerning what the grotesque is as a stylistic effect, let alone how or why it appears in modernism. No two critics or eras have had identical definitions of the word. The term is slippery, sliding easily from one response into its opposite: from horror into laughter, from regression to a primeval past, to an uncertain apprehension of possible futures. This is clearly demonstrated by the fundamental disagreement between two prominent critical appreciations of the grotesque by Mikhail Bakhtin and Wolfgang Kayser. Kayser, in *The Grotesque in Art and Literature* (1957), argues that the grotesque constitutes a 'comically, and partly satirically, drawn world that pleasantly entertains us,' but as we progress further into it our laughter 'finally altogether vanishe[s]'; we are left with a feeling 'of surprise and horror, [...] in the presence of a world which breaks apart'.[6] This shift from laughter to horror occurs because 'the grotesque world is – and is not – our own,' the 'familiar and harmonious world is alienated under the impact of abysmal forces': the uncanny

[6]Wolfgang Kayser, *The Grotesque in Art and Literature*, trans. Ulrich Weisstein (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1963), 16.

horror is all the more effective because our established expectations of light-hearted amusement and unreality become unpleasantly real (Kayser, 31, 37). Human bodies are 'reduced to puppets, marionettes, and automata, and their faces frozen into masks'—too human to be fully dead matter, causing the 'familiar and natural' to 'suddenly turn out to be strange and ominous' (Kayser, 183–5). Kayser's grotesque stresses horror to such an extent that even our laughter is 'filled with bitterness,' 'mocking, cynical, and ultimately satanic' (Kayser, 187), similar to what Charles Baudelaire describes as 'grotesque' in 'Of the Essence of Laughter' (an essay which undoubtedly had a strong influence on T.S. Eliot's grotesque bodies). However, Kayser asserts that in 'the French use of the seventeenth century' the grotesque 'has lost all its sinister overtones' (Kayser, 27). It is apparently only through the continuation of the gothic tradition in Baudelaire and Edgar Allan Poe that light-hearted laughter becomes 'an indefinable uneasiness, something not unlike fear' of 'diabolic origin'.[7]

This 'French use of the seventeenth century' is almost certainly referring to the satire of François Rabelais, whose work turns the extreme violence, death-turned-life and bodily mutilation Kayser identifies as grotesque into a source of comic mockery of the church and state. In *Rabelais and His World*, written partly in response to Kayser but censored until 1984, Mikhail Bakhtin argues that the grotesque 'cannot be separated from the culture of folk humour and the carnival spirit,' and that Kayser's 'gloomy, terrifying tone' is true only for the 'modernist form of the grotesque'.[8] Bakhtin's 'grotesque realism,' in absolute opposition to Kayser, is instead 'filled with the spirit of carnival, liberates the world from all that is dark and terrifying' (Bakhtin, 19). Laughter is 'ambivalent. […] It asserts and denies, it buries and revives' undermining horror by turning it into a 'gay monster' (Bakhtin, 11–2, 151), diminished and rendered harmless through mocking laughter. Bakhtin links the grotesque with what he calls the 'carnivalesque': the use of the bodily 'lower stratum' in medieval satire which 'digs a bodily grave for a new birth; it has not only a destructive, negative aspect, but also a regenerating one' (Bakhtin, 21). It undermines reality, but it also allows us 'to bring forth something more

[7] Charles Baudelaire, 'Of the Essence of Laughter, and Generally of the Comic in the Plastic Arts,' in *Baudelaire: Selected Writings on Art and Artists*, trans. P.E. Charvet (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1972), 144–5.

[8] Mikhail Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World*, trans. Hélène Iswolsky (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1984), 47–8; Note: Bakhtin is referring to late-nineteenth-century literature and onwards generally, not specifically modernism.

and better' to replace it. The old world is killed, eaten, incorporated into the human body, and then defecated onto the ground as fertiliser from which new life grows. The grotesque therefore has a 'utopian character' in its ability to deconstruct the normality of everyday life by dismantling and degrading 'all that is high, spiritual, ideal, abstract' (Bakhtin, 12, 19) and continually rebuilding it from the first principles of real, material life—literally from the ground up—into new revolutionary forms. Bakhtin's influence on literary criticism was equally as revolutionary. As recently as 2013, essays in *Grotesque Revisited* focus on 'the enduring impact of Bakhtin's ideas.'[9]

This lack of clear direction has carried over into modern criticism more generally. It is almost impossible to pin down a critical consensus on the grotesque due to its apparent timelessness and the wide range of reactions it provokes. Geoffrey Galt Harpham, for example, argues that 'the grotesque is a concept without form' (Harpham, 3). Instead of viewing the grotesque as having mutually exclusive 'styles' or 'eras,' Harpham suggests all these various grotesques are part of a single phenomenon, capable of provoking both humour *and* horror 'within the gap of ambivalence' (Harpham 71–2, 8, 11)—the merging of unlike categories of experience. It occurs in things that 'should be kept apart whilst still being joined together,' causing the mind to stumble over what Chao calls 'a logical impossibility' (5–6). This moment of uncertainty constitutes the experience of the grotesque and is therefore not constrained to the purview of only gothic horror or medieval satire.

Consequently, Harpham's grotesque appears as a merging of disparate elements to form something new. As a stylistic device, the grotesque takes familiar objects and concepts and, in combining them in chimerical fashion, makes new and alien objects, things which do not yet have names and categories to describe them. Therefore, in many cases the grotesque is also associated with the abnormal, which—as is the case for Bakhtin and Kayser—includes the disfigured, the disabled, the sexually non-conformist, minority bodies and the neurodivergent, combining as they do unfamiliar forms and narratives with the 'familiar' human form, determined not by reality but by cultural norms and stereotypes. Such bodies destabilise narrative conceptions of the human body as normal and perfectible because,

[9] Laurynas Katkus, introduction to *Grotesque Revisited: Grotesque and Satire in the Post/Modern Literature of Central Europe*, ed. Laurynas Katkus (Newcastle Upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars 2013), 1.

as Tobin Siebers puts it, 'serious consideration of the disabled body,' and indeed any body that is not straight, white and male in the Western conception, 'exposes that our current theories of reality are not as sophisticated as we would like them to be,' 'countering the illusion that "reality is sound," smooth, and simple with the claim that it is in fact sick, ragged, and complex.'[10] But this is not to say that everything unfamiliar is grotesque. As Chao notes, in its inclusion of anything 'confusing' as grotesque, Harpham's definition seems too broad a category. The grotesque is undoubtedly confusing, but confusion is not our first response to it.

The grotesque appears as a momentary phenomenon, appearing and disappearing in response to societal shifts. While Bakhtin, Kayser, and past instantiations of the grotesque can help us explore the grotesque, none of them actually acknowledge modernism as grotesque because their analysis is confined to medieval and early modern social analysis, and the very specific grotesquery that formed in response to that society. This narrow scope limits grotesquery, regardless of which critical opinion one chooses, to only one style and one time period. This is perhaps an inevitability of the grotesque, as it relies on subverting 'normality,' which is structurally and socially determined. Society defines what sort of things can be true or exist, and so the grotesque is always a response to that specific society's interpretation of reality. In fact, this mirrors a similar debate about the historicity of modernism. Are modernism and the grotesque both *temporal*, historically determined phenomena that belong to a specific moment in history? Or are they *a-temporal* genres: stylistic features that recurrently crop up in response to contemporary events?

What then is our response to the grotesque? Instead of confusion, when Kayser claims that 'we are unable to orient ourselves in the alienated world, because it is absurd' (Kayser, 185), he in fact suggests that, in grotesquery, horror and humour become *indistinguishable*. The absurdity of reality provokes our horrified alienation from it. We are 'unable to orient ourselves' towards either laughter or horror, and so we cannot form any clear opinion about the bodies we confront. As I shall elaborate upon later, horror and humour appear in grotesquery as two possible responses to the same indeterminate 'object' (although they are not properly objects, as they lack the clearly defined boundaries that separate one 'thing' from another). This forms the basis Lewis's rejection of 'English humour' for his own 'painful satire'. Horror repels us from the thing which shatters our

[10] Tobin Siebers, *Disability Theory* (University of Michigan Press, 2008), 67.

world-view, while humour seeks to maintain that distance, to reduce the grotesque to a 'one-off,' momentary lapse in reason that can be safely contextualised, contained and diminished through laughter. Horror arises from being in close proximity to grotesquery and causes us to recoil from it, whilst humour arises from distancing ourselves from the source of the grotesque. Horror and humour—gothic and carnival – are not opposites; both are inherent and critical parts of grotesque style and the ambiguous feeling it provokes.

In taking this stance, I argue that what we conceptualise as grotesque, and what the grotesque's effect and affect is, might be better explored via Julia Kristeva's concept of 'abjection'. Abjection provides a useful analytical framework for explaining how the grotesque body forces the uncategorisable and inexplicable nature of reality *before* interpretation upon us. Abjection, Kristeva states, is 'a border that has encroached upon everything' where 'man strays on the territories of *animal*,' a 'death infecting life' that threatens the boundaries of the self.[11] As opposed to clearly delineated objects, these 'ab-jects' are things which are not yet 'things,' objects which have no objectivity, which 'cannot be assimilated' into language because it is 'beyond the scope of the possible, the tolerable, the thinkable' (Kristeva, 1–4).[12] Her examples of the abject—spit, blood, excrement, corpses, friends who kill you, smiling murderers—are all things out of place, threatening the integrity of the body by allowing our insides to leak out, foreign objects to penetrate within, categories to blur, narratives to fail, and finally for our world, and the body itself, to be lost to us. This physical threat to bodily integrity substitutes for an assault on our mental separation from the external world. We respond to these unnameable abjects by rejecting them. Our horrified recoiling distances us from the thing that is tearing us apart, literally and figuratively reaffirming the boundaries of the self against their collapse under the assault from the unclassifiable. That which threatens individual identity serves only to define it more clearly: an idea which Conrad, Lewis, Eliot and Barnes all echo in their presentation of the individual body turned grotesque puppet, animal, or automaton.

[11] Julia Kristeva, *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*, trans. Leon S. Roudiez (New York: Columbia University Press, 1982), 12, 3–4.

[12] See also Chao, *Concept*, 50; he equally argues that '[the grotesque] fractures the orderly use of language for conveying meaning'.

Kristeva postulates a 'primal abjection' (Kristeva, 12–13)—the point at which a baby must inevitably separate itself from the mother-figure if it is to ever become an independent, self-supporting being. Kristeva traces all acts of repulsion and disgust back to this moment of rejecting the female body, allowing us to differentiate between ourselves and all that lies outside our bodies. Everything which provokes horror is a reminder of our assimilation back into the mother's body: a desire to have all our desires fulfilled, to lose our identity and let someone else live for us, a 'power as securing as it is stifling' (Kristeva, 13).[13] To reject this feeling of unity with the world is to assert a set of (arbitrary) boundaries between what is self and what is other. However, abjection need not be horrible. As we shall see, Barnes—in contrast to Conrad, Lewis, and Eliot—configures the reunion with the female body as a utopian demonstration of a female-oriented society. Similarly, Lewis's theorising of 'painful satire' suggests a way we might expand abjection to include laughter, for it too is a recoiling from anything which challenges our sense of reality by defining it as abnormal or unreal. The grotesque might therefore be understood as something which overwhelms our limited understanding of the world with a glimpse of what the world truly is, revelling in our foolhardy attempts to make sense of it. Laughter and horror provide landmarks by which readers can navigate and respond to reality, but in combining both in the grotesque, modernism 'defamiliarises' reality—making the familiar strange by preventing the reader from orienting themselves within it.

The way in which Kristeva illustrates the abject is notable for its very bodily element, and almost all theories of the grotesque agree on this fact: even Bakhtin and Kayser corroborate this bodily dimension. The term 'grotesque body' was first used by Bakhtin, who states 'the grotesque body is not separated from the rest of the world. It is not a closed, completed unit; it is unfinished, outgrows itself, transgresses its own limits' (Bakhtin, 26). Bakhtin claims that the 'distinctive character of this body is its open unfinished nature, its interaction with the world'; the grotesque body is perpetually 'unfinished' and thus remains at the forefront of the new. As the point of contact between ourselves and the world, it

[13] See also: Sigmund Freud, 'Civilisation and its Discontents,' in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud 21*, ed. and trans. James Strachey, (London: Hogarth Press, 1961), 64; who makes a similar comparison with the 'oceanic feeling' of religion, suggesting writers of the early 1930s may have conceptualised this in similar ways.

challenges definitions and limits—especially those concerning 'the human' (Bakhtin, 281)—by going beyond what we acknowledge as clean, individual, rational and normal to include animals, objects and other people, things we must exclude from human identity. This is not to say Kayser has no conception of the body. Rather, the 'grotesque fusion of human and non-human' of 'masks,' 'caricaturely distorted figures' and 'automata' where 'the mechanical object is alienated by being brought to life, the human being by being deprived of it,' produce an unsettling 'estranged world' in which 'instruments […] overpower their makers' (Kayser, 183–4). The body-as-instrument reveals the insignificance of our thoughts, when a mindless machine could perform all our actions as well as, if not better than, we could. Both Kayser and Bakhtin's grotesque bodies undermine our straightforward relationship with corporeal reality, alienating us from the world we assume we inhabit directly, yet are somehow materially distinct from. This has potential for a comic, utopian and joyous return to nature, reality, and primitive animality, but also the potential to destroy our sense of self, reduce us to mindless animals and strip us of bodily autonomy.

The body is therefore critical to engaging with the grotesque. We assume the body to be a direct extension of our self, a fixed and unchanging incarnation of our intent. The grotesque body challenges these assumptions by changing into alien forms, merging with other objects, or severing our control over it. Abstract ideas are given flesh: the collapse of the ordered, reasonable world is mirrored by the collapse of the ordered and rational body which, because it inhabits physical space, cannot be easily dismissed as unreal. The body thus *visually embodies* the fragility of our perceptual world by turning it into something we must confront. This idea of an essentially visual, spatial grotesque is not new: Chao has argued that no modernist art movement 'can provide a more successful habitat for the grotesque than can Surrealism' (Chao, 7, 130). He argues that painting and poetry provide a much stronger visual framework for grotesquery, and relegates modernist literature to the background. However, this is an incomplete description, especially when discussing Lewis and Barnes. As both artists and authors, their literary and visual bodies constantly draw upon and inform one-another, sharing traditions, imagery and language.

While critics such as Greenberg, Clark and Anspaugh have analysed modern uses of the grotesque, few critics have made an explicit connection between the grotesque and modernism itself. Harpham asserts that 'the grotesque shares with the classic an independence from time, place,

and culture' (Harpham, 80), but this apparent timelessness has misled criticism into viewing the grotesque as being somehow a primal, atemporal force, and thus not 'new' or related to modernity. When modernist studies approach the subject, it is typically with reference to some specific use of grotesque style, although what this 'grotesque style' actually constitutes varies considerably. For example, Bakhtin argues that 'the grotesque became the prevailing form of various modernist movements […] found in Kayser's concept' in which regenerative laughter 'is completely absent,' leaving it 'deprived of regenerating ambivalence' (Bakhtin, 51, 21). Bakhtin's grotesque has a stronger link to the past than to the present, which has supposedly lost the art of producing ambivalent grotesques altogether. Even Kayser suggests that 'modern' texts are 'replete with grotesque features' that show a 'greater affinity' (Kayser, 11) for horror. This is an unsustainable view in its assertion that the modern period is uniquely bleak, and that the past was somehow utopian. If modernist writers use the grotesque, it is seen only as an ironic reference to earlier art forms—as in Joyce—in order to satirise their dingy, miserable, modern world, rather than something intertwined with the idea of modernity itself. The grotesque thus belongs to the past in much the same way modernism was traditionally reserved for the 'men of 1914'. Critics like Harry Levin described modernism purely in the past tense, but drawing such arbitrary boundaries around modernist works fails to impose any definitive 'end' or 'meaning' on modernism. Modernist criticism has begun to challenge such assumptions about its temporal and geographic exclusivity, but the same cannot be said of the grotesque.[14]

I argue that the grotesque is a *contemporary* phenomenon that arises out of the clash between past and future. Like modernism, it is strongly linked to sudden change, social upheaval, and newness. In moments like these, the codes used in art to inscribe 'realism' suddenly fail to capture contemporary reality and are revealed as illusions—mediation, rather than mimesis. Conrad, Lewis, Eliot and Barnes capture this moment of rapid change by marking it on the grotesque body. In their work, mass-culture, commodification, mechanisation and violence are represented by human-automaton hybrids, marionettes, exploded corpses, unthinking beast-women and bodies pushed and pulled by crowd-forces. The very literature and art that depict these bodies seems to become grotesque too. Works of

[14] For example, see Paul K. Saint-Amour, 'Weak Theory, Weak Modernism,' *Modernism/modernity* 25, no.3 (2018): 437–459.

this period are often sprawling, combine different artistic traditions, and are frequently abandoned, left unfinished for their apparent failure to conform to their author's desires. They resist easy classification, employing horror and humour simultaneously, providing insight into the self-undermining and contradictory style of modernist literature. Greenberg argues that Lewis's *Tarr* 'anticipates a tendency that emerges more fully in satire of the 1930s wherein modernism's oppositional and satiric energy begins to take itself as its own target,' but I argue this 'self-targeting' permeates modernism throughout the period, and is made visible by the deployment of the body as a site of ambiguity—loathing and desire, self and other combined.[15] Through modernist presentations of bodies as alien, dysfunctional, mechanical things that escape control, producing dual disgust and amusement, we see modernism itself exposed as a grotesque 'body of work'. Modernist texts extend past their authors, often undermining the messages they set out to make.

The grotesque does not belong to any single time period, but to the idea of modernity itself. While critics, including Bakhtin and Kayser, heavily periodise the grotesque, in doing so they conclude that the grotesque is confined to only one era, because they do not recognise the changes the grotesque undergoes. Harpham argues that 'the grotesque object impales us on the present […] forestalling the future': he is correct to see the grotesque as painfully and violently intertwined with the present, but rather than a 'forestalling,' the grotesque seems to pull the future *into* the present, confronting us with its limitless, uncertain potential. The monster in Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* (1869), for example, is a grotesque attempt to 'renew life where death had apparently devoted the body to corruption,' 'tortur[ing] the living animal to animate the lifeless clay,' 'collecting bones' and 'materials' from the 'dissecting room and the slaughter house'.[16] Shelly anticipates future technological and scientific developments that may rework the human body into something alien and inhuman—collections of impersonal, modular parts. But this holds less grotesque potential today because readers are familiar with transplants, prostheses, and artificial life-support. 'Eventually we discover the proper place for the new thing' as Harpham states, and 'to understand the

[15] Jonathan Greenberg, *Modernism, Satire and the Novel* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 29.

[16] Mary Shelley, *Frankenstein: or, the Modern Prometheus* (Boston and Cambridge: Sever, Francis and Co., 1869), 42–3.

grotesque is to cease to regard it as grotesque' (Harpham, 16, 76). Thus, the grotesque is of necessity always evolving; as new bodies are incorporated into cultural knowledge, they lose their ability to horrify or amuse. Harpham seems correct in his assertion that 'the grotesque stands as a type of that-which-generates-progress' (Harpham, 149)—namely, it is *avant-garde*.

Frankenstein is particularly relevant to Eliot's conception of originality in 'Tradition and the Individual Talent' (1919). Frankenstein's 'profane' (F, 43) exploration of the 'human frame,' his 'filthy creation' which he turns 'in loathing from', might be likened to Eliot's description of the author's 'occupation,' where 'the most individual parts of [a poet's] work may be those in which dead poets, his ancestors, assert their immortality', and 'art may be said to approach the condition of science'.[17] Frankenstein builds his monster by 'select[ing] his features as beautiful' (F, 45) and, despite ensuring the disparate 'limbs were in proportion,' he produces something of 'breathless horror and disgust,' which becomes 'more powerful than thyself [Frankenstein]' (F, 78). Like the construction of the monster, modern works are 'something more' than their authors. Modernist reworkings of earlier traditions of the grotesque reveal something important about how modernist authors viewed modernity. There is something inherently grotesque in being on the cusp of two epochs: a hybrid monster of old and new, primitive and civilised, regressive and progressive, and this is especially true of modernism. It was an unshackling of tradition, filled with regenerative potential for limitless new possible futures, and a source of anxiety that this unshackled future may be filled with degeneration, collapse and apocalypse. The grotesque body provides a set of codes with which to capture a modern moment which resists depiction in language, and therefore it remains a productive framework for analysing both modernism and our own modernity today.

Therefore, we might ask: what it is that marks out modernism as particularly apt for grotesquery? Over the modernist period, the past and future of the European state and subject was rendered uncertain and unreal through a vast number of overlapping events. The body underwent rapid recontextualisation and defamiliarisation. The violence of the First World War, Russian revolutions and the Spanish Civil War produced deformed and amputated bodies, demonstrating the inherent divisibility

[17] T.S. Eliot, 'Tradition and the Individual Talent,' in *The Sacred Wood: Essays on Poetry and Criticism* (London: Methuen, 1920), 43, 47.

of the self in a very visual and affronting form. On the street, war-wounded veterans became so numerous that it was no longer possible to ignore their presence. In this destruction and reformation of the body, its inherent use-value is revealed: those left without arms, legs and eyes become unproductive and thus worthless (because their bodies are 'worth less') to society. The rise of mass production and machinery—as well as scientific attempts to explain the human body via evolution and degeneration—turned bodies into collections of parts and functions that could be disassembled and remade in modernist conceptions. Tireless, precise, and mindless machines supplanted human labour and rendered the living body obsolete.

Consequently, the modernist use of the grotesque does not resemble the earlier Medieval satire, early nineteenth century Gothic literature and *fin de siècle* decadence. Yet the modernist grotesque is nevertheless a continuation of those forms. These modernists drew on and adapted earlier sources of the grotesque body to modernist uses to subvert and deconstruct modern reality. Any analysis of modernist grotesquery would be incomplete without discussing what they chose to adapt, how they altered it and why they did so. In fact, there are notable connections between the rise of modernism and the rise of the Gothic towards the end of the eighteenth century. Considering the French Revolution, numerous wars throughout Europe, the rise of Romanticism, the invention of the novel, the industrialisation of cities and the rise of imperialism, it is perhaps not surprising that this period produced a genre which employed the old, decrepit and decayed to stage the emergence of the unknown, unfamiliar and supernatural. In fact, the works of H.G. Wells, Bram Stoker, and Henry James participate in a similar resurgence of Gothic literature towards the end of the nineteenth century, suggesting these authors—and their audiences—had similar tastes, expectations and worldviews to their Gothic forbearers.

Although recent scholarship has taken an increased interest in the relationship between modernism and the gothic, more needs to be done to demonstrate the gothic inheritance visible in modernism's grotesque presentations of the body.[18] I argue that modernism was responding to a similarly gothic, rapidly changing society. The most direct example of this sudden cultural shift was in technology and scientific developments over the period. The twenty years leading up to the twentieth century

[18] See for example, *Gothic Modernisms*, eds. Andrew Smith and Jeff Wallace (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2001).