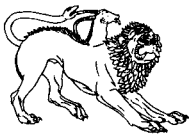

Introduction
Loving the Grotesque

> If a painter should wish to unite a horse's neck to a human head, and spread a variety of plumage over limbs [of different animals] taken from every part [of nature], so that what is a beautiful woman in the upper part terminates unsightly in an ugly fish below – could you, my friends, refrain from laughter, were you admitted to such a sight?
>
> – Horace, *The Art of Poetry*, 24–20 B.C.

THE MORNING OF 17 JUNE 1935 came on wet and gray as New Yorkers opened their papers at breakfast tables across the city and glanced through the headlines. Amid the stories of President Roosevelt's new work program, which was to provide three hundred million dollars for the employment of white-collar workers – and even included plans to employ artists, writers, and actors – were less portentous stories that nevertheless attracted the reader's eye. Members of the fashionable Mayfair Country Club, atop Eagle Rock in West Orange, New Jersey, were recovering from the excite-

ment of the shooting death of a young gangster in their bar the previous evening. The gunman had recognized one of the five detectives who had come to the club to arrest him and, leaving a young blond woman at his table, had drawn his pistol. Before the gunman could fire, Captain William Wylie of the West Orange police drew his revolver and fired a shot that struck the man – Vincent Diauon, age twenty-seven – in the head. Diauon turned and attempted to flee the barroom, just as the officer fired again, the bullet striking Diauon in the back. Still struggling ahead, Diauon made it out of the bar and across the foyer to a small dining room, where he collapsed and died. Over a hundred people were in the bar at the time of the shooting, and about twenty couples were on the dance floor as the band, playing "She's My Cookie," brought the music to "an abrupt halt."[1]

The adjacent headlines announced other compelling stories. Michel Fokine's mansion on Riverside Drive had been burglarized to the tune of twenty-five thousand dollars worth of jewelry and minks. One brooch was itself valued at ten thousand dollars. Two people had drowned when they had rowed out to look at Admiral Byrd's Antarctic exploring vessel in Jamaica Bay and their boat had capsized, and in Jamaica, Queens, three boys who ranged in age from eleven to thirteen had stolen a gun from a policeman's coat and "embarked on a career of crime." They had first tried to rob a woman on the street, but she had slapped their faces and sent them on their way. They moved on to a nearby lot where they found William Walsh, age thirty-six, asleep in the grass. They woke him, and when he refused to turn over his money, the boys shot him in the head, killing him instantly. One of the older boys, Lisbon Lawrence, was the son of the Reverend Edward Lawrence, pastor of the Mount Calvary Baptist Church.[2]

Turning past the front page, readers would have glanced through the announcements on entertainment. There was to be another air show on the weekend. There was plenty of action in boxing and baseball. Earl Carroll's new *Sketchbook* was in its third week at the Winter Garden. Leslie Howard and Humphrey Bogart were still in *The Petrified Forest* at the Broadhurst, and the Theatre Guild was continuing a left-wing revue called *Parade* that wasn't expected to run much longer. Many of the New York readers would already have seen *Three Men on a Horse* and *Anything Goes*. *The Children's Hour* was giving its 249th performance that night.

As the morning advanced and the rain outside turned to a fine mist, many would have closed their papers and glanced again at the front-page stories before heading off to begin the day. Some would decide to see *Tobacco Road* again that night. For many it would be the third time.

Theatre and Culture

The Swiss theologian Karl Barth once counseled preachers to approach the pulpit with the Scriptures in one hand and the day's newspaper in the other. A similar, though more athletic, approach seems necessary for those who hope to understand theatre as a part of cultural history – to juggle at once the slippery "facts" of an era and the even more elusive "facts" of the theatre of the period and to keep them suspended together in some sort of wobbly orbit. There is always the danger of dropping one set on the floor.

The American theatre of the Great Depression – here taken from 1930 through 1941, by which time the massive gears of war production were grinding out a new economy and a new

set of national obsessions, was a specialized mirror of the national consciousness. The theatre is too complex an art for simple reflection. The vast variety in status, location, ideology, and plain artistic ability in producers of theatre is dwarfed by the astonishing problem of audiences and their situation and motivation within culture. Both of these are set within the shifting matrix of a culture that, at first glance, appears to possess an unlimited ability to contradict itself.

In spite of these complexities, patterns do emerge from these encounters with the past. Siegfried Kracauer (in *From Caligari to Hitler*) and Mikhail Bakhtin (in *Rabelais and His World*) offer ways of understanding an art as a function of culture and as indicators of what Kracauer calls the "mentality" of a nation. These studies are convincing because they strike a balance between the analysis of text and of cultural context, a method that avoids the aesthetic myopia that is the danger of exclusively text-based analyses as well as the statistical imprecision and exaggerated "objectivity" of more recent "reception" approaches. Of course, the writer who takes up literature or film may find the job somewhat easier, as the objects of their researches at least have the good manners to stay put so that the researcher can read them or watch them in largely the same form as those who first read or watched them and who participated in the social adventure of their making. The objects of theatre, however, like the age that produced them, have disappeared, and we are left with photographs that may be misleading, reviews that were meant to sell papers, and descriptions of what people think they saw. To create a meaning from these materials requires a double intention: to admit at once a selection from the sea of "facts" in the service of one's intuition and, at the same time, to discipline that selection by ap-

plying to it a larger intellectual construct of the cultural motions of the period. It is a creative job, more like a novelist's than a social scientist's, because the critic is leaping from "data" to a reconstruction that amounts to a narrative. It is the telling of the story of the age.

A Social Theory of the Grotesque

To any consideration of depression America, we bring the images already etched in our minds. We see breadlines and apple sellers in their inevitable urban streets, grainy and in low-contrast black and white. We see police bashing strikers in blurry stills from newsreels and lean "Okies" looking worried, though perfectly framed within pleasing compositions. We see dust bowls and Roosevelt and Shirley Temple, the NRA eagle on a storefront and Tom Joad crouching in a ditch. We think of a thunderstruck audience at the opening night of *Waiting for Lefty* and of a cool and intelligent Hallie Flanagan defending the Federal Theatre against philistine politicians. These images and hundreds more of comparable power and durability compete for the role of defining icon.

If one becomes more systematic and studies the headlines of the newspapers of the era in search of the topics that most fascinated newspaper buyers, a quintet of obsessions emerges: Hitler, Roosevelt, Lindbergh and flying, gangsters, and the movies. Highly sensational narratives were the norm for even the most "serious" newspapers and, after reading several hundred of them, one notices a peculiar, persistent characteristic in the tone and structure of these stories. It is the same characteristic that crops up again and again in many of the most

successful theatre productions of the era, as well as in the films, radio drama, sport, and other entertainments. It is the grinning face of the grotesque.

What has come to be called "the grotesque" has existed from the time of the earliest narratives and cave paintings, and critics have often noted its special abundance in the art of cultures that are experiencing intense stress and social anxiety. The concept itself has been adapted within the past century to our special need to describe objects that sustain in tension ideas or styles or points of view that are contradictory and that, consequently, provoke an ambivalent response in the perceiver. The grotesque is thus the hallmark of depression America. It is the one critical idea that can take in the absurd contrasts of a country in a time when it is both broken down with misery and despair, and brimming over with a perky native boosterism; resplendent and self-aware of its status as the first technological age, and cringing with fear at the changes that technology had wrought; looking forward with a utopian eye to "The World of Tomorrow," and hearkening back with a quaint nostalgia to a horse-drawn and gaslit age that lay only a couple of decades in the past. The grotesque is the one critical idea that explains the theatre of a period offering the astonishing twin successes of *Life with Father* and *Tobacco Road.* The grotesque is the one name for a social machine capable of taking in the horrific materials of a world spinning toward conflagration, mixing them with the commonplace and the comic, and producing objects that one could look at and then know – objects that may have been troubling but that nevertheless had been tamed.

Every writer on the grotesque since the birth of the word (from a hole beneath the streets of late-fifteenth-century Rome, wherein workers found a Roman grotto filled with paintings of

absurdly conflated plants and animals) has considered the grotesque as contradiction inside of a work of art.[3] The now-classic applications by John Ruskin (*The Stones of Venice,* 1851), Wolfgang Kayser (*The Grotesque in Art and Literature,* 1957), and Mikhail Bakhtin (*Rabelais and His World,* 1940) form a unity with more recent Freudian approaches in analyzing the work of art as an indicator of contradiction in a whole culture.[4] When one's rummaging in the cultural junk heap goes farther afield to include both art and less "artistic" cultural artifacts, the grotesque reveals itself as an amazing kind of animal that can appear and disappear, winding its way in and out of the cracks in the wall that separates life from its representation in art, smiling from behind the words of the news report, and tempting the artist to catch him. The grotesque is not only a result of random playfulness on the part of the artist or artisan; it is the representation of the "not-making-sense" that people perceive in the world around them, a perception that is pervasive in times of rapid social change and to which the people of such an age become especially sensitive.

The word "grotesque," taken up enthusiastically by Renaissance commentators, rapidly grew from a narrow referencing of one set of Roman paintings to a whole "type" of art and then to an overarching critical idea because it provided the linguistic tool to describe not just an ingredient that they had noticed in art, but also moments of their own experience. In Renaissance Europe, the word described the countless instances of incongruous juxtaposition that occurred as an old "mentality," based in the philosophical assumptions of Christian dogma and the practical acceptance of ecclesiastical power, gave way in erratic stages to a new mentality rooted in notions of science and temporal power. Such moments were, as they are now, persistent in their demand for attention. They do not fit into the reg-

ular forms that art and reason provide for the processing of experience, the forms by which we order our lives and convert experience into meaning. A tragic form provides a structure for finding meaning in our moments of suffering or ecstasy; a comic form makes meaning from experiences of abandonment and insight. Historical moments like the Renaissance or the Great Depression, however, are rife with experiences that do not fit into those structures. Nevertheless, people feel the ancient need to represent these troubling experiences in some way so that they might feel the tentative assurance of control over experience that representation provides. Their efforts take the form of the unresolved mixing that appears to the critical eye as "grotesque."

Depression America provides a rich field for an analysis of the relation of grotesque art and artifacts to the events of the age and to other simultaneous cultural signs. The experience of rapid conversion to a technological world, coupled with the devastation of the economy and the growing threat of a new world war, produced a sensitivity to what might be called a "sense" of the grotesque in large numbers of people. This same sense led those whose role it was to represent "reality" in whatever form to give special emphasis to incongruous juxtapositions in their work; thus, the historical situation of depression America led to a widespread sense of the grotesque that found voice in cultural signs as diverse as the narrative style of news reports, the structure and content of commercial plays, and the rise of the horror film in Hollywood. Within this particular cultural context, these grotesque objects achieved a relative popularity that is historically unusual.

Flannery O'Connor frequently expressed her frustration that "anything that comes out of the South is going to be called grotesque by the Northern reader, unless it is grotesque, in which

case it is going to be called realistic."[5] Few culture makers of the depression set out to create "grotesque" representations. With the exception of highly self-conscious artists like William Faulkner and Nathanael West, artists and other chroniclers of depression America set out to represent "reality" in a way that seemed true (in the sense of accurately descriptive) to them or – as in the case of Tod Browning and other directors of horror films – to represent the fantastic. Of course, the assumptions that form the foundation for a study seeking a link between the "mind" of a culture and its products are that the makers of cultural artifacts were at least unconsciously affected by the social history of their time and that their works are irremediably marked by that history.

If the representation of "not-making-sense" does provide audiences with Freudian "pleasure" (relief), it would seem – following the principles of the Frankfurt School – that the grotesque object works to buttress the dominant ideology. As a force that reduces the fears of the bourgeois ego, grotesque art would thus be seen as a narcotizing tool of patriarchal capitalism, and notions of the disruptive power of the grotesque would make little sense.

A solution to the problem of how the grotesque can both relieve anxiety and oppose the dominant ideology lies in a distinction about the kind of pleasure it provides. The pleasure that we feel in the representation of the experiences we call "grotesque" is highly limited. The grotesque is unlike the mythic categories of comedy and tragedy in that it fixes experience but does not convert it to meaning. A grotesque representation provides a degree of distance from a contradictory moment but it does not resolve the contradiction. The grotesque object offers a kind of box in which to place the odd moment so that we can go on with life, but it does not allow us to bundle the

package and put it neatly away with the label, "Here I experienced suffering," as the tragic form might do or, "Here I saw the way of the world and laughed," as we might in deriving meaning through the comic form. Instead, the "box" of the grotesque is always on the front shelf of our consciousness, labeled but always open, and has things moving around inside.

Thus, the grotesque object does not narcotize its audience because it does not allow them to be easily finished with the experience of observing it. When a grotesque performance has "happened" for an audience, they do not leave the space feeling "good" in the sense of experiencing a sentimental satisfaction. The comic tango between Hitler and Stalin featured in the 1939 edition of the long-running *Pins and Needles* (Figure 1), a leftish satirical revue, is emblematic of the tension in grotesquerie: The dance is funny, but at the same time generates a feeling of anxiety. We pretend, as an audience, that we have the tyrants captive here before us, our puppets, dancing fools; but behind the rigid poses and frozen expressions arise in our imaginations specters – the real Hitler, the physical Stalin, powerful and deadly, furious at this scene of mockery. We laugh in our dark theatre but feel the imprint of fear, or – to reverse the metaphor – see around the mockery the halo of a potential retribution. An incongruity has been represented, but not resolved.

Tania Modleski points to a similar phenomenon in her convincing analysis of contemporary horror films.[6] Whereas the Frankfurt School saw "mass culture" as a monolithic construct, solidly aligned with the dominant ideology, Modleski points to the possibility of subtlety and contradiction within that culture, even in so "top-directed" and seemingly "industrial" an arena as Hollywood cinema. She demonstrates how films like *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre, Dawn of the Dead,* and *Halloween* –