The Medium-Sensitive Experience and the Paradigmatic Experience of the Grotesque, 'Unnatural', or 'Monstrous'

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Abstract

To create the conceptual space to analyze the evident and structural similarities between the art experience, the (new) media experience, and the media art experience, the author approaches the “medium” as “techniques” which “make [the seen] strange.” A disruption of the perceptual process, a destabilization of the cognitive routines, a sudden sensitivity to the medium and an instant emotional response are at the heart of these (art) experiences. The author argues that the (well-studied) experience of the grotesque provides a model for the analysis of these (understudied) medium-sensitive experiences of the “strange” or “unnatural,” for which the grotesque experience is emblematic.

Key words: art experience, new media experience, media art experience, medium-sensitive experience, grotesque experience, perceptual process, cognitive routines, (de)naturalization, (de)sensitization, aesthetic category, embodied cognitions.

In his contribution to an anthology on the grotesque from 2003, Noël Carroll wrote that from “a merely statistic point of view, the grotesque is one of the leading forms of mass art today. […] [T]he grotesque seems omnipresent. Thus it appears timely to address it theoretically.”1 Carroll’s approach of the grotesque is interesting in many ways. He analyzes Homer Simpson, Edward Scissorhands, self portraits by Cindy Sherman and other “grotesques” (see a Renaissance example in Fig. 1) as “structurally similar in that they all mix distinct biological and ontological categories.”2 As such, they “elicit certain affective states, namely, horror, comic amusement, and awe.”3 Carroll also argues that “these emotional responses have interesting family relations with each other and with the core structure of the grotesque.”4 Pivotal is the subversion of “our categorical expectations concerning the natural and ontological order.”5 To this we strongly respond: the categories of our understanding suddenly and momentarily fail, as Wolfgang Kayser rightly stated in his standard work on the grotesque from 1957.6

Though Carroll’s argument (in line with standard research on the grotesque) is convincing, his explanation for the current prominence of the grotesque in mainstream culture is less satisfying. He sees a relation with the present “quickly accelerating entertainment industry” (e.g., the demand for an endless variety of new and fantastic grotesque beings, triggering sudden and strong emotions). Yet he overlooks the current period in history as a medium-oriented one, with medium-sensitive viewers with a focus on new optical and digital techniques (e.g., C.G.I. or 3D on an IMAX wide screen). Moreover, he overlooks the perceptual experience of these new techniques—which almost inevitably “grotesquely” distort, fuse, enlarge and/or deform the seen, and thus typically fuse our biological and ontological categories and destabilize our cognitive routines—as a paradigmatic experience of the grotesque. In other words, the experience of the grotesque is not merely or exclusively a perceptual experience of grotesque beings (e.g., fused, enlarged, formless, gigantic beings): it is always, more basically, an experience of the distorting and destabilizing powers of the techniques involved in the perceptual process. Overlooking them (as well as their perceptual impact) is an inherent part of the problem under discussion. This can best be explained in terms of (I) being sensitized, followed by (II) being desensitized to the distorting powers of (new) techniques / media.

Being Sensitized to Media

I) Being sensitive or sensitized to a medium means that the sensitivity to the medium vanishes as the “strangeness effects” wear off due to the mechanisms of “habituation,” “automatization” or “algebraization.”7 This inevitably leads to a decrease of sensitivity to the distorting powers of these once new techniques, to the verge of percepts becoming almost fully insensitive to them. It automatically leads to a point where the presence of techniques in the perceptual process is not noted anymore: a swift shift from medium to mediated may become not only habitual, but even natural or “second nature.” Being perceived as “natural” indicates that, once the mechanisms of automatization enhance a smooth, swift and quick shift in the perceptual process from perceptual input to cognition, fully automatic and unnoticed by the percieptants, they may altogether stop to take note of the ontological difference between a tree or cockroach in nature and one on a canvas, photo, TV, laptop or IMAX wide screen. It is for this very reason that the special ontological status of the image as “mediated” may automatically be overlooked and may well go unquestioned. This is in itself an interesting symptom of percepts being (fully) desensitized to a medium (e.g., television): it easily leads to an (almost
full) identification of real and mediated. In other words, overlooking the medium is a predictable and almost inevitable consequence of the process of automatization: once techniques become second nature, we lose sight of them. Everyday percepts may find this adequate, as automatization enhances action as needed in everyday life. Researchers, however, may argue that research does not necessarily benefit from quick shifts from input to cognition, and that automatization facilitates a “dormative” use of an ambiguous and under-researched and basically primitive, magical or mythical cognition, and that automatization from quick shifts from input to action as needed in everyday life. Adequate, as automatization enhances everyday percipients may find this consequence of the process of automatization. Interestingly, this suggests that the twin mechanisms of deautomatization and automatization are constitutive of the fields of art and media respectively, and that the two are inherently connected.

Findings

In addition to the standard works on the grotesque, I would argue that the very experience of the destabilization of the perceptual-cognitive routines by the use of new techniques creating a distinct experience of distortion of the natural order is constitutive of the category of the grotesque understood as an aesthetic category (Kayser, Kant). This should remind us that an aesthetic category is not merely or in the first place a class of objects (frescoes, paintings, pictures, statues, collages) produced in the course of history, but rather a class of aesthetic experiences. It should also remind us that the existence of this experiential category points in the direction of a highly sensitive cognitive “apparatus,” which clearly signals the use of new techniques: by marking the seen/heard as “unnatural.” Lastly, this should remind us that the relatively short intervals in history in which the grotesque bloomed need to be reconceptualized as medium-sensitive intervals in history, which typically destabilize the ontological stability of mimetic tradition and produce new art, new insights and a new episteme in their wake.

I cordially thank Ed Tan for his comments on my article.

References and Notes


9. Shklovsky: “If we start to examine the general laws of perception, we see that as perception becomes habitual, it becomes automatic. Thus, for example, all of our habits retreat into the area of the unconsciously automatic […]. The process of ‘algebraization,’ the over-automatization of [the routines of perception of] an object, permits the greatest economy of perceptive effort. Either objects are assigned only one proper feature—a number, for example—or else they function as though by formula and do not even appear in cognition.” Shklovsky [8] pp.11-12.

10. One may argue that automatization puts the critical function in researchers to sleep. On “conceptual fog” and its “dormative” function, see: Gregory Bateson’s Introduction to his Steps to an Ecology of Mind (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000).

11. Understood as mediated / real (not mediated) at the same time.


15. Renaissance, romanticism, early and late 20th century – see Kayser [6].