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## DISSERTATION ABSTRACT

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Since it was first coined in the late fifteenth century, the term “grotesque” has baffled critics and commentators who have used it to describe the work of such artists as Bruegel, Goya, and Kafka, and more recently, Hitchcock, Flannery O’Connor and Dali. Moreover, a certain elasticity has allowed the use of the term in an extraordinarily wide range of theoretical orientations, as well as in cultural studies projects concerning art, music and film. Theorists suggest that the grotesque depends upon a representation that undermines cultural values by foregrounding the material nature of the human body. Critics also assert that the grotesque is a distinct artistic form, though they are unable to define (or agree upon) its structure precisely because “grotesque” seems to suit a wide variety of works that share few if any formal features. In short, theorists have realized that it is an easy task to identify a work as grotesque, but certainly difficult to approach the grotesque directly.

*Thinking Through the Grotesque: Legacies of the Enlightenment* proposes a new method for defining the grotesque. Very much in the eye of the beholder, the grotesque nevertheless has a distinctive effect—an anxiety about how to respond at all, a simultaneity of horror and humor produced by the inability to decide, and it thus produces a treasonous recognition of the elusive nature of any polarity between viewer and image, self and not-self. My study, then, takes as its jumping-off point the historical moment of the eighteenth century—a period in which industrial capitalism, rationalism, and the autonomous subject first confronted one another in ways that continue to affect us most immediately. Bringing together theories of spectatorship, as well as considerations of gender and genre, I explore the ways in which a “feminine” grotesque body was used to figure cultural anxieties concerning the space of public entertainment, the effeminate man or macaroni, and the position of the “foreign other” within literary and visual culture. From this base, I define the grotesque on the basis of the function it serves for both artist and audience, and I argue that the grotesque provides a space in and through which people imagine the complexity of bodily and social experience using metaphors beyond the range of current aesthetic practice.

Ultimately speaking to concerns and anxieties about the dissolution and reformation of the culture at large, the image of the grotesque body reminds its culture of the potential metaphors just beyond grasp that might describe lived experience. Within the debate concerning the moral status of public entertainment, as well as in the discourse concerning the macaroni, the figure of the grotesque body illustrated the extent to which eighteenth-century sexual ideologies inadequately accounted for people's lived experience, and it thus provided a way to describe and realize alternative visions of sex and gender. Likewise, in the period's representation of "foreign others," the image of the grotesque body worked to shore up the British body as "natural" at the same time that it suggested the elusive nature of a distinction between native and foreign.

By its very nature, the grotesque exists as an indeterminate mode of representation because it solicits an undecided reaction to both its form and its content. Testifying to the tension inherent in the act of representation, the grotesque remains profoundly disturbing. In its use in these eighteenth-century discourses, the grotesque foregrounds the artistic difficulty of illustrating men and women whose behavior exists outside the bounds of approved standards. At the same time, because the grotesque refuses to make the understood human body a refuge from its own excessive nature, it dances about the edges of aesthetic ideology and articulates an option outside contemporary practice.

At bottom, then, the grotesque provokes vehement response because it reveals so vividly larger cultural conflict about the status of the human body and the function of its representation. When it reveals that, since the early modern period, the human position continues to be characterized by the very indeterminacy that makes possible its representation, the grotesque suggests that the only way to be truly human is to realize one's implication in culture—to recognize one's self as grotesque.